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October 30, 1894

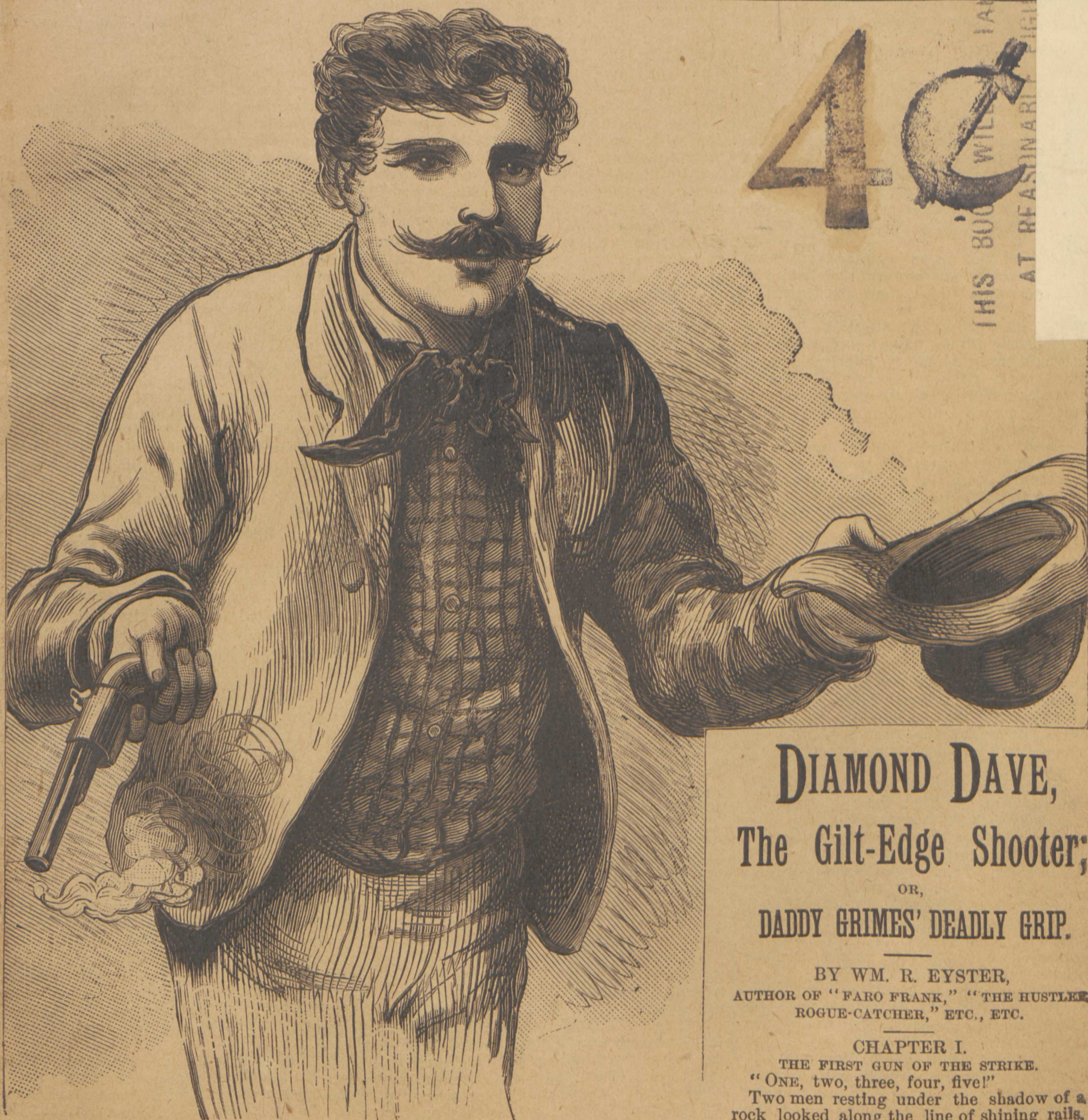
No. 901.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 cents.

Vol.



DIAMOND DAVE, The Gilt-Edge Shooter; OR, DADDY GRIMES' DEADLY GRIP.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "FARO FRANK," "THE HUSTLER
ROGUE-CATCHER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST GUN OF THE STRIKE.

"One, two, three, four, five!"

Two men resting under the shadow of a
rock looked along the line of shining rails,
and one of them counted as they looked. In

"A SPORT AT LARGE, WITH A REPUTATION OF BEING A GILT-EDGE SHOOTER."

the distance they saw a gang of men, who looked and acted as though they were a good crowd to avoid in that lonely spot.

The speaker was a young man, with a fresh face, keen eyes, broad shoulders, and clad in a neatly-fitting suit, which seemed rather the wrong thing then and there.

His companion was a man older by a dozen years, and in almost everything a contrast.

He was roughly clad, his long hair straggled out from under the much battered brim of his hat. His nose and chin were pointed, while his face had a sallow look. He was chewing tobacco nervously, while his long bony hands gripped the tripod of the theodolite which he had been carrying for the greater part of the day.

"Five they be, an' bigger imps ov Satan never drew breath. What divelment are they up tew, now?"

"Trying to make things comfortable for the Express, I should judge. Looks as though they meant to let it off the rails; but, I must say, they have chosen a decent spot for the operation. It can take the ditch without much danger of damage, beyond delay."

"That's what. An' I don't see how tew stop it."

"Only one way, Sandy. Sail in! If they keep up that motion they will have half a mile of track up before we get half done resting. I think I'll go down and talk to them right now. It's a thousand pities you left your guns at home."

"I d'unno ez it air my put in, er yourn; but ef so be yew intend tew go down, Sandy'll hev to go 'long. No time tew waste. Say quick."

The other rose up and stepped out from his late place of concealment, and before he had taken half a dozen steps Sandy was at his side.

They had not been in hiding at all, but the five evidently did not expect to find any one there, and never thought the huge rock which had hid them might cover lurkers. As the two walked swiftly, and the distance was not great, they were upon the raiders before their coming was noted.

"Hold on, there! You've done more damage in five minutes than you can fix in as many hours. Suppose you go a little slow till we can find out what it is all about."

That was the first intimation the five had of the presence of the strangers, and every face was turned in their direction, while a savage scowl distorted that of their leader.

The latter was short and thick-set, with close-cropped hair, and bull-dog jaws. He held a pick in his hand, and had been using it with as much vigor as skill.

"An' who be yez, mon, to sthop the good worruck? Av yez wants to stand up phor the graspin' minopoly say the worrud an' down yez goes. Av yez wants to see honist min makin' the sthuggle wid tyranny and ophression, an' not take part in it, we won't force yez; but go 'long wid ye afore ye git in to throuble."

"Why, you infernal scoundrels, do you think you five can fight the road with the whole United States behind it to boot? You have been rustling around here pretty lively, but so far the damage is not so much that it can't be fixed. I'll give you just one chance, Mike McKane. Get that track lined up in time for the Express, and swear off any more of this nonsense, and I'll agree to keep mum. If not, I'll flag the train, and after that I'll see that you have a chance to play checkers with your noses behind the grating."

"Harrud worruds break no bones, Mither Baker, an' it wad be betther phor yez av yez spake fair an' azy. Phat wor yez do in spoyin' round here?"

"You know me, do you? You ought to be sure then that this outrage will be stopped, one way or another. It was a lucky thing that to-day was chosen to run a line down from 'The Fair Isabel.' Come, Mike!

Listen to reason. Get this thing in shape, as you can, and it will be all right unless I hear of something of the kind being tried on again. You men are the last in the world I would have suspected of trying to wreck a train."

Baker had been cool enough from the outset, but now that he had secured the attention of the men he was willing to try the effect of argument. It was possible he could carry his point. Though it was the first time he had ever spoken directly to any of the men, he had from the outset recognized them as being the regular gang of the section.

They, in turn, evidently recognized him as a civil engineer in the employ of the company, but felt none the more friendly toward him on that account.

The wonder was they had not rushed on him at first sight, and downed him for once and all. Men engaged in their present employment are not apt to waste time in parley.

"Sure, Mr. Baker, we don't want to do yez a harrum, but we've sthruken, an' so hez ivery mon wid a heart in him along the road. An' there's a car wid guns to the top comin' for the dirty spalpeens they call deppity marshalls. Betther to sthop thim roight here than to lit them go on phor to do murder."

Baker looked keenly at the foreman, and decided he was telling the truth, or something near to it. It was the first he had heard of the big strike, but he could believe something of the kind might have happened while he was practically out of the world.

At the same time, he did not propose to see the track torn up if he could help it, and he was a man who when he had once made up his mind could dare a great deal.

Besides that, he did not trust Mike McKane. A strike there might be; but was there not something more than a desire to keep back the car of arms spoken of? Mike had the reputation of being a desperate man, in spite of the responsible position he had been filling.

If he had only been armed Baker would have felt easy on the subject; but by a most exasperating oversight he had left his pistols behind him; and the man he had called Sandy was in the same fix.

When it had cropped out some few hours before that both of them were unarmed he was inclined to treat it as a joke; but Sandy had looked serious, and repeated the old truism that a man may carry a gun for years and never use it; but just when he has not got it will be the time he will want it, and want it mighty bad.

"There may be a strike; and perhaps, when I know the rights of the thing I will have as much sympathy for the strikers as anybody; but I will never consent to see the property of the company damaged. Go on with your striking if you want to, but straighten up the track to start with, and then leave it alone. If you don't you may find yourself in a bad box before you are done with the matter."

Baker spoke with a tone of authority. Unarmed, and with the odds against him of five to two, he was uncertain what the result might be if he precipitated matters to an engagement, yet he never thought of receding from the position he had taken, though he knew these men could be desperate enough.

How desperate, he was yet to find out. Mike McKane had concealed his feelings well, though he was really boiling over with rage at the interruption, and at the man who made it.

"Sure, an' it's to save loife, Mither Baker, that we're here. Thim bluddy deppities are hcired ter shoot; an' they always be afther thinkin' they moust earn their money. Yez wouldn't want ter say ther poor b'yes stritched out, joost phor insistin' on their roights wid a bluddy corporashun?"

"The boys will have to take their chag of that when they go into the fight. I know as well as I that if they leave property of the company alone there will be no shooting, if you strike from now to day of judgment."

Gradually, Baker was being deceived the manner of the men, and he was beginning to think that they would listen to reason as he understood it.

Sandy was listening grimly, but with a word. Baker knew the man of the sallow face would stand by him, and that if he had anything to suggest would not be backward about saying it. He gave a glare toward him now, and though Sandy never turned his head he caught the look, and made a scarcely perceptible motion by way of warning.

And, it was none too soon.

The two parties were drawing toward each other, and Mike's face suddenly changed its expression.

"Look out!" exclaimed Sandy, in a low tone.

Then, the pick in Mike McKane's hand left it, and it came hurtling forward.

CHAPTER II.

THE DANDY FROM DEAD LATCH.

THE warning given by Sandy was more instinctive than for any practical purpose.

From under the slouched rim of his battered old hat he had been watching the section boss with unwinking gaze, and the two parties were so near he could catch the glint in the eyes of the Irishman, while his knowledge of the man told him what was coming.

As the hand of the Irishman swung forward Sandy gave a step ahead.

Then, he gave a twirl of the staff he held in his hand, caught the pick in mid air, and sent it to one side. One of the sharp points was buried deeply in the ground.

"Darn yez, take that!" yelled Mike as he made his cast, with all the skill and vigor that lay in his brawny arm.

An instant later he shouted:

"Down thim, b'yes! Down the dirthy scabs! Thromp the loife out av thim! Break their bones av yez don't want to suck yer fingers behindt the bars."

And Mike, unarmed as he was, plunged forward to lead the rush, while his men joined in, flourishing their picks and shovels.

Two men against five, and the five on murder! Yet the two never flinched. Kent Baker threw himself together into an attitude best suited for attack or defense, and stood waiting to dodge, strike or parry, while Sandy, handling his staff as though it was a rifle with a bayonet attached, dropped into the position of a soldier on guard, and waited for the attack.

Yet the charge never reached the two, for every man halted as though he had been shot. There was a brace of sharp clicks which reached every ear, and then a laughing voice, which to them seemed somehow to have an echo of death behind it:

"Easy, Mike; easy! Sorry to do it, gents, but I'll have to call you down. Reckon you know me."

Sandy's eyes never for a second left the gang, which he watched with a cold, unflinching stare; but Kent Baker cast a quick glance toward the new arrival, who had so suddenly appeared to the rescue.

A young man was standing a few paces away, and he had not left his tools at home.

On the contrary, he held a brace of shining tubes, one of them covering Mike, while the other menaced the remaining four at large.

He had a bright, handsome face, which was wreathed with a good-natured smile, and he was dressed with even more attention to style than Kent Baker. In fact, he was a regular dandy at large.

The new-comer was a stranger to Baker, who had never seen him before, but it seemed no idle boast when he said the foreman knew him.

All the repairmen evidently did know him, and they were not very likely to presume on the acquaintance, if appearances went for anything. Mike surveyed him angrily, though his only answer was a savage growl.

"That's right, old man," continued the stranger, airily. "It's not worth while to keep the fun up any longer, for you can bet your bottom dollar it's not all going to be on one side. What's going on here, anyway?"

"Course ye, Diamond Dave! For why does ye mix in whin it's not your game at all, at all? It's a sthroke, av ye wad know it, an' the spalpeens worlayin' in wid the bluddy monopoly."

"Looked as though you meant them to be laying in with a wooden overcoat," laughed the man addressed as Diamond Dave.

"I'm not caring a copper about your strikes, or the bloody monopoly, as you call it; but I do object to seeing a fellow mortal dissected with picks and shovels. Reckon you have done about as much damage here as you ought to, and I'd advise you to pack your gripsacks and travel by the first boat before I take the notion to say something else. You hear me?"

Fortunately, there seemed to be a dearth of fire-arms in the gang; and with those trim muzzles covering them, the men did not care to attempt to begin again the rush which had once been checked. Mike looked along the track and his brow cleared a trifle as he saw the damage which had already been done.

"There be toimes whin killin's no murder, Misther Diamond Dave, an' this wor wan av thim, perhaps, but we'll lit ye off wid a warnin'. Look out phor the nixt toime we mate."

"But, b'yes, the fun are over, so come along!"

There was a savage warning in the tones of the section boss that might have aroused some men to anger, but the smile never flickered on the face of Diamond Dave, and he saw the gang turn away without a word by way of retort.

Sandy, the silent, gave something like a sigh of relief as they went.

He had allowed the stranger to run things according to his desire, without a word of encouragement or protest, but had kept a keen watch on the movements of Mike and his men, and even now never ceased to follow them with his eyes until they had fairly passed beyond the limits of a throw of a pick, or a shot from some hitherto-concealed gun. Evidently, he did not trust the Irishman.

Baker did not seem quite so well satisfied.

He took a step forward, as though about to follow, and then shook his head savagely as a mechanical touch where his pistols should have been recalled again to him the fact that he was unarmed.

"Oh, come, pard, what you going to do now?" laughed the champion of the occasion.

"You just build a bridge for them, if they need it, and let them go."

"That's all well enough in theory, but in practice it don't seem always the best thing to do. We can't get to Standback in time to return with tools, and if I had held the drop on them as you did I'd have seen they left things in trim for Number Twenty-five."

"Strikes me you don't think much of small favors. Sooner or later you would have found Irish Mike a hard man to drive; and I'm not sure he would have gone away quite so peaceably if he had not thought he had either finished his job, or could finish it well enough to afford us but little room to crowd in."

"That's it. That is just it. They will go down the track a mile, and begin their work again. It must be stopped."

"Excuse me. I don't claim more prudence than the most of men, but you don't suppose I would undertake to drive five ruffians into Standback at the point of the pistol, and then be mobbed if I got there? They would have a shy at us somewhere along the road, unless we began by murdering the whole outfit, and I hope I'm too wise for that, to say nothing of a trifle of the bowels of human nature I have in my make-up. I'm willing to stop here and flag the train, and if anyone comes monkeying around to give him or them the best in the shop, but that's about the best we can do. I wouldn't do that if I thought there was a reasonable chance of getting word to the Express. But there will be no chance to send a man here to-night unless he has a squadron of cavalry along with him."

"True," said Baker, a good deal calmer.

"And I suppose there is no use to try to straighten up the track ourselves. Spikes and sledge are wanting, though, so far, they have done no damage to the rails. Looks as though they were going to make a fire of the ties, and give them a toasting. In another hour they would have been bent beyond straightening."

"That might be part of your circus, but I'll swear to it that it's none of mine. The road wouldn't haul me a mile for good luck, and I'm not working for fun. Best we can do is to camp out till the train comes. After that—I can pay my fare, if there's a reasonable show to get on to-night, and if there's not I can foot it to Standback along with the rest of the crowd that will be going that way."

"He's 'bout right, boss," said Sandy who had been listening after his somewhat stolid way. "We can't do nothin' else; an' we've kim out a heap sight better than I looked fur when Mike swung his pick. He meant it tew kill. All I'm hopin' fur air that there's no other devilment behind it. Reckon the rest of the gang air half-way white, or more, but I would like tew say ez much for Mike."

"I hardly know what it could be," answered Baker, promptly.

"It was evident the ruffians were not armed with anything but their tools, or they would have cleared us up, quick enough. If they had been going to do anything beyond what they were at there would have been a sprinkling of firearms in the crowd."

"Don't worry about that," interposed Diamond Dave, his face becoming sober, as he considered the problem. "If there is anything further than what appears on the surface it is not likely these fellows will have a hand in it. But they may send some interviewers who will not be so easy to dispose of. I'm not sure but what it would be a good plan to take to the brush until the Express is due."

"Or walk the track eastward until we meet it. You understand, of course, that I am in the employ of the railroad company, and feel like being loyal to the limit. I had heard nothing of a strike being on, though there were whispers that it was coming. Sandy and I have been locating a line for a side track from the Fair Isabel, and so, are a couple days behind the age."

"So am I, for that matter," answered Dave, as they moved away.

"You heard Mike address me as Diamond Dave. It seems he recognized me, and being a sport at large, with a reputation of being a gilt-edge shooter, not apt to linger long on the trigger, he had a very wholesome respect for me, and my sixes. I've been off in the mountains, too, though I may not look like it, and had some crazy idea about flagging the train as she went by, and getting a lift into town. Perhaps we'll get there yet!"

The two looked around. Darkness was not far off, and in an hour the Express would be due. Was the break they had just left

the only thing in the way? They talked the matter over, not as men who feared, but as men who were annoyed. The moments slipped away as they dropped tie after tie behind them, and at last, as they stood on a long stretch of straight track, they heard the rumble of the approaching train.

"Get your torch ready!" exclaimed Diamond Dave; and as Baker crushed up a newspaper for a torch, and held a ready match, they heard the mad gallop of a dozen horsemen.

CHAPTER III.

A REMEMBERED FACE.

THE crew of the "Pacific Express" were not in the happiest of frames of mind that evening, as the train dashed along.

They were a trifle late, but that had nothing to do with the uneasiness which possessed every one, from engineer to train-boy. They were aware that a strike had begun, and were uncertain just how far it was going to extend—or who were to be included in its operations.

One thing was pretty sure. No matter who it was went out it would be uncomfortable for the rest; and it might be that all hands would be left high and dry somewhere in those lonesome wilds.

The passengers also had heard something of the labor difficulties, but with the indifference of Americans, who never borrow trouble, or seem to anticipate until the last minute that such things can affect them.

In one of the Pullmans two ladies were seated, and though apparently looking idly out of a window were conversing in a low tone.

The two were evidently mother and daughter, though the elder woman was by no means past the age of feminine attractiveness. Her face might even yet be called beautiful, though there was here and there a line suggestive of trouble and care. Were it not for the girl woman at her side it might have been hard for the casual observer to believe she had passed her fortieth year.

"And so, you see, Vera," she was saying, "I have reason to hope the mystery will be unraveled at last. For myself I do not care, since I have enough to satisfy my few wants; but it may mean a great deal to you, who are young, and with your course in life yet to fashion."

The young lady smiled—and when Vera Vane smiled, her charming countenance became altogether beautiful.

"My dear mother," she said, softly, "I have an idea you are not exactly Methuselah in his latter years; and certainly believe you have ages yet to live. I am young yet, and, as you say, can make my destiny. It is for you I am interested. Your wants are simple, when they have to be so; but there is no one living knows better how to enjoy wealth. It is true, we are in no great danger of starving, but think how much brighter life would look with half a million at your command. You need not make any excuses to me. The end is worthy of the means in this case, and I am sure I see nothing discreditable about them."

"Perhaps not; and yet, I cannot help but reproach myself with having ventured on what may be considered, were the facts known, as a wild goose chase, to say nothing of the hardships and dangers it may entail."

"The hardships may be borne I suspect," answered Vera, with another smile, as she looked away from the window, along the aisle of the luxurious car.

"And, as for dangers, is not one place as safe as another so long as we are guarded over by the cherubim of destiny?"

"If you can accept Emerson as gospel you may think so. But—what is that?"

She pressed her face against the pane, and tried to look through the window. The engine had given a short, sharp whistle, and

already the speed of the train was beginning to slacken, while by the side of the track, at some little distance ahead a light like that of a torch was flaring a signal for a halt.

They heard a party in the next seat say:

"I hoped we could get through ahead of it, but I'm afraid the strike has hit us, right on the home run."

"Sounds more like train robbers!" exclaimed another voice.

"Better hide your valuables till we see. Listen!"

They did listen, Mrs. Vane's ears the most anxiously strained of all; and they heard the rattle of fire-arms, and a shouting, coming from somewhere near the front end of the train.

The air had gone on with a jerk, and sparks were flying under the sliding wheels. Around them was confusion and bustle. Mrs. Vane gave a little cry of terror, and then gathered her nerves up as well as she could and put on a brave front, while Vera looked around, uncertain exactly what could be the meaning of all this.

The speaker who had first suggested train-robbers was looking out of the window, and dodged hastily back, just after Vera had heard a peculiar, short, sharp sound immediately outside.

It was the hist of a bullet; and though hearing it for the first time the young lady recognized it instantly, and grew a trifle paler, though, save for that, and a nervous contraction of her slender, shapely hands, she gave no sign of alarm.

"We'll make it yet!" exclaimed the individual who had dodged the already escaped bullet. "They're having some sort of a private circus among themselves, and the engineer is going to run back if he can get the start of them. He's getting it now, and if they don't mount his cab—"

He looked from the window again, without finishing his sentence. A stray bullet or two was not as hard to face as unsatisfied curiosity.

Vera had noted the gradual, yet comparatively quick, stoppage of the train. Now, she felt a slight impulse from the other end as it seemed. The wheels had reversed their motion, the train was crawling backward.

Nothing could have raised such an agony of impatience as that slowly accelerating rate of speed. She glanced once into the shining eyes of her mother to make sure she was not overcome; then she threw up the window which an hour before they had closed, and looked along the line of other heads, trying to pierce the dimness of the night, and read between the flashes which were lighting up the forward end of the train.

"By the Lord of Israel!" exclaimed the man on the seat in front, "they're getting something they don't often meet with. They've met a man that knows how to handle himself—and them, too! I'll have a hand in if it takes a leg off!"

And, with a pistol in his grasp, the individual sprung from his seat and hurried out. Had Vera been able to follow him with her eyes she would have seen that he managed in some way to gain the roof of the car, and then run along until the baggage car was reached, when he began to fire at the dark figures which were already beginning to drop away from the more swiftly moving engine. The crisis was about over.

The man fired three shots, and then suddenly bent forward. Below him, on the narrow platform of the car several men had dragged themselves up, and gained the deck of the now swiftly moving train. Desperate villains they were, and had not yet given up all hopes.

From the tender came a huge chunk of coal, thrown by a powerful hand, which sent one of them reeling from the platform, while his companion fell to a shot fired from above.

For the present the victory was complete, and for once a swoop of the train-robbers had been foiled.

The conductor had taken a shot or so from the rear of the train with his Winchester, and seeing the chances of battle were in favor of the train, started forward. He dropped to the platform just as Diamond Dave swung himself over from the tender to the baggage-car, and pounced on the wounded outlaw a trifle ahead of the conductor.

"Hands up, you!" shouted the latter, sternly, while he tried to bring his Winchester to bear.

"No use to resist; we got you foul!"

"That's all right, Cap!" yelled the man from the top of the car, who lay stretched at full length, peering down.

"He's the Gilt-Edge Shooter that's been doing all the fighting. Steady now! It's Diamond Dave, from Dead Latch; and as square a man as ever trod shoe leather."

"Thanks, Mr. Gross," said Dave, without turning his head.

"It's been a lively little hustle, but I reckon we got there with both feet. And say, Cap, one of your men who started into this thing with me is on the tender pretty badly hurt. Get a couple of the crew to help me carry him back where we can look him over, and then I'll tell you how the land lies."

"All right, if Mr. Gross vouches for you. It won't be so easy, perhaps, but we'll try it on. It won't do to stop the train for another mile or so. Who is the man?"

"Baker is his name, and he has been locating a side track to the Fair Isabel. If it hadn't been for that you would have had a dead engine and a looted train on your hands."

"Yes, if Tom hadn't cracked on steam, and run through them. That's what he ought to have tried, perhaps."

"And Tom would have taken the ditch in the very sweetest style before he was many minutes older. If there had been a chance to get through do you suppose we would have been risking our brains crowding into this sort of work. Excuse me."

The train was now moving backward almost at schedule speed, and the passengers, who knew well enough what had happened, were congratulating themselves on their escape, and beginning to yearn for the particulars.

Vera was perhaps as curious as the rest, and was wondering how soon they could learn the facts, and whether another effort would be made that night to pass the spot of danger, when there was a backward movement of those in the aisle and through the door came crowding four men who carried between them the limp form of Kent Baker.

They paused under the hanging lamp, and Vera caught a glimpse of the face of the young engineer. It was white and haggard, save where it was splashed with blood, yet those who had ever known it could recognize it only too well. Vera remembered it, and crouched back with a low, tremulous cry.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SECOND SWOOP.

MR. GROSS came back to his seat after a while, and looked carelessly over his moveable property with the conscious air of a man who has done his duty.

"Is he dead?" asked Miss Vera, leaning over, and nodding toward the now made up berth, which contained Kent Baker.

"Not yet, nor is he going to die for the present. Think he was just knocked senseless about the end of the game. Dave says so, and he is as good as a doctor. Ought to be—he's furnished enough subjects."

The last was said with a chuckle which had much of admiration in it.

"What was it? How did it happen? What is to be done next?"

With a woman's expansiveness she went

on with her questions until it began to seem as though they would have no end.

"I am afraid I cannot answer at all. I helped carry him in, and so didn't hear what the men had to say; and Dave was too busy to talk. Guess he'll be this way shortly, and if you have ears you can take in particulars. Neither of us will oblige by having a listener."

"And who is the gentleman you call Baker? Is he one of the postal clerks?"

She had already slipped out the young man, and something told her he was not a passenger, while she was a little puzzled to think what position he could fill on the train.

"Scarcely," was the dry response. "He's a sport, and a square man to tie to, as we say out West. Handy with the pasteboards and revolver, and probably could do something at a pinch, with a knife. And mighty good it is for us all that he happens to be that sort of a man. As near as I can make out, he took the contract to whip the whole outfit of train robbers pretty much alone. The other gent is game enough, but he left his sixes at home. If he lives to be a thousand years old I don't believe he will forget them again."

"You know him, do you? Is he a friend of the gentleman who was hurt?"

"I know him, of course, after a general sort of way, as we know everybody in the West who happens to come our way. Have probably taken a hand with him half a dozen times, though I never expected to see him here. As to the other gent, it is probably the first time they ever met; he is in the employ of the company, more or less. A civil engineer I think."

While they were talking the train came to a halt. It had been running slowly since it had fairly got beyond the reach of the outlaws, with a flagman preceding it. There was little danger of being run into, but in all cases a conductor is expected to take the safe side.

"Here we are, back again, at last. We may as well make up our mind to stay all night," continued Gross, and with a bow he turned away.

Like a good many other passengers he wanted to stretch himself outside, and glean what intelligence was possible as to future prospects.

Vera arose, after a while, and went to the water-cooler. Her mother had little to say, and she was growing nervous with uncertainty.

The conductor had just come in, and was speaking to Diamond Dave. This answer came to her ears quite plainly as she passed them.

"Thanks, Cap, but I'm not engaged in hunting train robbers—not until they have made their haul, anyhow. I've told you just how things lay when I left there, but if you want to send a hand-car up to repair damages that's all right. I'll stay here with my friend till I see how the case pans out. If the boys try to hold up the train, that's a different matter. I'll hold my cards right along with the rest of you, but I can't say I'm gushing over the road, or that I want to turn an honest penny, shooting fellow mortals. I did rather more of it to-day than I cared to, but that was some thing else."

"Don't stay on my account," said a rather weak voice from the neighboring berth, and Kent Baker partly rose up.

He made no very happy picture, for there was a cloth bound around his head, and several ugly-looking bandages of court-plaster could be seen.

"Don't worry, old man. I'll be staying on my own, which is good enough for me. You lie down and go to sleep."

Kent Baker dropped back again, but it was not altogether from weakness.

He had caught a glimpse of Vera Vane's

face, and the resemblance he saw in it to another face which he remembered fairly took his breath away. When he looked around again over his shoulder she had flitted down the aisle, and was no longer in sight.

After that there was a little questioning from her mother, a brief consultation with everybody that came along, and who looked though they might know something were the possibilities of the night. Then, and the ladies decided they would have to save the best of it, and Vera tried to think as she had found no trouble going to sleep in the car.

While moving she ought much more to rest serenely when the car was lying peacefully on a side track. If she had been a young man she would doubtless have tried to get a place on the hand-car which went down the road on a tour of exploration. As it was, she finally closed her eyes and fell to wondering how Kent Baker happened to be there.

The train was to remain until orders were received, and they would not be given until after the return of the hand-car. To the west the wires were down, but communication was still open with the dispatcher's office.

Midnight came, and still there was nothing from the exploring expedition.

The berths had long ago been made up, and the train lay on the siding, with the fire banked in the engine. Without orders to attempt it the conductor would not take the responsibility of moving forward; and it began to look as though his decision had been a wise one. Nothing had yet been heard from the hand-car. Unless something had happened to it or its human freight, some word should have come long before this.

It had taken Vera a long while to fall asleep. The attack of the road-wreckers had been exciting enough of itself, but when, in addition, she saw the face of one whom she had mourned as long ago dead, there was another item to think of, scarcely less thrilling, if, indeed, it did not engage the greater part of her meditations.

In the car the lights burned low, and the rest of the passengers appeared to be asleep. Diamond Dave occupied the berth above Kent Baker, and was making up for lost time. The fact was, he had not slept much for three days and nights, and the present position of affairs could hardly have suited him better.

He could sleep almost anywhere, but he was not above a few trifles of personal comfort, and the Pullman berth presented a few advantages over the hard bunk at the Hotel Royal where he had originally hoped to spend the night.

The Gilt-Edge Shooter had not taken upon himself the contract for protecting the train, and having once assured himself of the fact that the crew expected to remain alert for the night he resigned himself to the slumber he so much yearned for.

Nevertheless, he slept with both ears open, and his pistols convenient to his grasp. When he turned in it was with his belt around him. He knew something of what it was to be suddenly awakened to find a weapon in an unusual position, and a friend of his had had a revolver stolen from under his pillow before the intruder began to ransack the room.

Miss Vera could not know all this, but it must be confessed the presence of the handsome sport was reassuring whenever the thought of him returned to her mind. She was thinking of him when the curtain in front of her berth was slightly agitated.

Some one was moving along the aisle in his stocking feet.

She thought nothing of it at the moment.

During her long journey across the continent such a thing had happened a dozen times. And there were a dozen men within hearing, most of whom she knew were

armed, and all of them ready to spring at her call.

Then, she recognized a sweet, sickening smell, and was ready to make that call, but it was too late. A heavy hand pressed what seemed to be a damp sponge over mouth and nose, while a strong arm, suddenly winding around her, held her helpless.

It seemed like an age that, vainly striving even to struggle, she was held thus. Then, her muscles relaxed, and she lay almost like a dead woman. Even Mrs. Vane was not roused as Vera was lifted from the berth, with the bed-clothing wrapped about her, though an instant later she awoke suddenly, and mechanically thrust her arm over to touch her daughter.

The place by her side was empty, and with a premonition of trouble the elder lady sat bolt upright, in time to hear a stumble, and then a curse, from the further end of the car.

"Vera! Vera!" she cried, not knowing why, or what it was she feared.

The lethargy which held the young lady was not as complete as it had seemed.

That cry reached her ears after a fashion, and urged her once more to a last effort to break the spell which had benumbed her.

It was the fight of a pigmy with a giant, yet it had its measure of success. Hastily she turned her head, relieving her lips from the pressure of that carelessly held sponge, and uttered a faint shriek.

The sound was heard through the car, for nearly every one had been aroused by the frantic call of the mother. Immediately afterward was heard, too, the slam of a closing door.

Diamond Dave leaped from his perch with a bound, his pistols swinging out as he came, and a dozen other men were crowding into the aisle, when under the trucks at the end toward which all eyes were directed there was the sound of a fierce explosion, and the car seemed to be bodily lifted into the air.

"Dynamite!" whispered some one; and then, outside, they heard the clatter of horse's hoofs stretching away in a mad gallop.

CHAPTER V.

HELD FOR RANSOM.

At the alarming sounds, Kent Baker gathered himself up, and rolled out as good a man as ever. He forgot the pounding he had received, and cuts and bruises pained him no longer. If most of the passengers were panic stricken, what wonder? They did not hear the shrieks of the wounded as they expected to hear them, and the car appeared to have stood the shock reasonably well; but who could tell what was next to come?

Diamond Dave was as cool as the coolest among them, and had he known exactly what had happened, would have perhaps seen something for the emergency.

He had "strike" on the brain, however, and his first idea was that a reckless attempt had been made to wreck the car, without thought or care for its occupants.

The hand of Kent Baker on his shoulder changed the current of his thoughts.

"For heaven's sake! What was that scream? Who was the woman who gave it?"

"How should I know? There was an infernally pretty girl cutty-eyed you when they brought you in. Did you know her?"

"Could it be?" exclaimed Kent.

"Let me go! It must have been her, and she is in danger. Did you not hear? She was at the other end of the car."

"Bless your soul! Who is trying to hinder? We'll go together. Don't strain yourself. She has been frightened by the explosion, but she's not the kind to die of a shock. Keep your head cool."

As they pushed along through the men who were crowding toward them they heard the voice of Mrs. Vane:

"Vera! Vera! Oh, my daughter!"

It needed nothing more to convince Baker that it was no dream, and that the woman he had seen, and the woman he had loved were one and the same.

Yet, though the young men forced their way through and through, all the time making sure they were overlooking no one, not a trace did they find of a fainting girl.

The end of the car had been lifted from the rails, and was more or less racked out of shape, and broken, but the doors were open, and now that the swarm of those seeking egress at the other end was passed there was nothing to hinder their going on out.

If the trainmen had been slack in their watch they were on hand now, and Diamond Dave suspected the danger must be over from the way in which they crowded around.

A question or two served to gain all the information that was to be had, and it told but little more than was already known.

There was an explosion under the truck, which had first called attention to the spot. Then, several dark figures were seen, darting away to join a body of horsemen, drawn up at a little distance. This was the very first thing known of their presence, and they did not linger an instant.

Nothing had been seen of Vera, but Diamond Dave knew without telling she had gone with the horsemen as a prisoner, and for the present anything like pursuit was useless.

"Looks as though I was elected to stay in the swim," said the Gilt-Edge Shooter, cheerfully.

"Don't take it to heart, old man. You and I couldn't imagine any such infernal nonsense was going to happen or we might have slept with both eyes open, and two fingers on the trigger. The first thing is to find out what it is all about. Was she rich?"

"Rich as you call it, no. Her mother had a few thousands, enough to keep them in decency."

"Perhaps there has been a mistake? She may look like some one who is rich. Captain Curse might make a mistake, for you can chip up to the limit that this is his work, and that he wouldn't have laid it out for less than twenty thousand. When he makes a haul he intends it shall count."

"If it was Curse, then, why did he not attempt to make a cleaner haul? With the whole train lying at his mercy he might have gone through it at his leisure."

"Guess all the wealth on board wouldn't amount to enough to pay for the risk. He is apt to know what he is doing. But, if you know that poor woman, you had better see what you can do to give her a little hope. She is just going wild."

"I doubt if she has ever met me before, and I fancy you could do more to serve her, for you would know better what to promise. There is no use to try to follow on foot, but certainly, a party can be organized. Tell her the truth, and say her daughter shall be saved."

"Not much chance for a party of men who would be worth their salt until the gang gets back with the hand-car, or we go down the track to reach them. That man you call Sandy is made of good stuff, and we might roust him out and see what he has to say. Then, there is Gross. He may want to go along. He has nerve and dollars, and in a case of this kind might be willing to lose a few days. There may be a few others on the train who could help, but it's asking a good deal when you think of it. And I don't see how they can be fitted out this side of Standback."

Hastily Dave ran over all this, but mean-

while was keeping up a separate train of thought in his own mind, and trying to lay out a plan which would fit to the emergency.

Baker was taking things coolly at last, and the words of the sport had suggested a possible course to pursue.

"Four of us would be enough for a start. See Mrs. Vane and assure her that every effort will be made to find her daughter. Then find Gross, if you can, and come back to me. We may be able to discover the direction taken by the outlaws, and if it is toward the Fair Isabel, we can get men there who will aid us, and men, too, who are fit for the work."

"Right you are, my friend, but don't forget that little can be done before daylight. A start in the wrong direction might carry us a hundred miles out of the way before we were done with it. Hold yourself steady a moment, and I'll be back. Fill in the time talking around, if you want to, but don't say too much. Captain Curse has friends where you don't always think of looking for them."

The young sport glided away to re-enter the car. Mrs. Vane had fallen helplessly back, overpowered by the terrible feeling of helplessness which had mastered her when the truth had been blurted out in her hearing.

Diamond Dave had not been the only one to recognize the handicraft of the notorious road-bandit, Captain Curse.

There were other passengers in the car besides Mrs. Vane. Some few had remained, and others had come back. When they found the danger over they did not care to wander around outside in dishabille.

"One moment, Mrs. Vane," said Dave, softly. "Try and be cool for a bit, and see if you can give us a pointer as to what all this means. You are already aware of the situation, or I would not speak so openly. To reassure you, I will say, in the start, that some of us are going to set things straight, but if we knew the ins and outs on the start we could get down to the contract all the sooner."

"Thanks, thanks! But, what can I know more of it all than the rest of you? My daughter was by my side when I went to sleep, and when I awoke she was gone. Now they say she has been carried off by Captain Curse. Oh, if you can save her, for heaven's sake do it, and, poorly as I can reward the service I will do so to the utmost limit of my means."

"That's all right, madam. It sha'n't cost you a cent, so far as money goes. What I am after is to know whether you can give me a hint of any reason why Curse should have chipped, beyond a ransom for his catch. He's not the kind to trouble himself for anything under twenty thousand, and I understand from one who probably knows, that you are not in condition to pay that without a pretty severe strain on the treasure chest."

"Not the half of it. It was to make an attempt to somewhat better my shattered fortunes that I undertook this wretched journey."

"Ah! Might make it warm for some one before you got through, then. Who is it? That might be a clue."

"No, no! Do not imagine it for a moment. This outrage could have no bearing on that. It is the work of brigands who imagine they can extort a ransom. I have heard of such things. But, oh, my poor daughter!"

"I don't want to force your hand, Mrs. Vane, but just think it over, and if you can confide in us, better do it before morning. It will be a heap sight easier if we know just the sort of a hand we've got to buck against. It might make our play a sure thing."

"Thank you, thank you!" answered Mrs. Vane, wringing her hands; "but, indeed, I have nothing to confide. It is only a wretch-

ed game for gold, or so it seems now, to me."

And it looked as though the lady was not far wrong; for just then there was a shout outside, which suggested that intelligence of some kind had arrived.

A man who had attempted to follow the course taken by the outlaws came staggering back. He had been cleverly captured not a hundred yards away, and he brought with him a note addressed to Mrs. Vane which read:

"DEAR MADAM:—I have your daughter and hold her subject to your order, upon payment of twenty thousand dollars. Remain where you are, but raise the money. So soon as we can see the way clear we will confer in regard to the payment. If we are followed or interfered with, it will be at peril of your daughter's life. So don't tamper with matters but come right up to business."

"CAPTAIN CURSE."

CHAPTER VI.

A BRAVE GIRL'S PERIL.

THE Fair Isabel Mine, on the mountain-side ten miles away from the railroad, was a property of unknown value, since none of its stock was on the market, and the company which owned it kept their affairs as strictly to themselves as it was possible to do and yet make money.

John Malloy had been identified with its fortunes from the time of its first discovery, and, though he had money in other directions, this was, in the language of friends, "his best hold." He held a controlling amount of the mine's stock, and did pretty much as seemed to him best with the property.

It was a little hard to tell whether John Malloy had risen from the ranks or not. He was Irish, every inch of him, and out here looked and talked like the men who slung picks and handled shovels in the drift. At least, he did when he was in public.

There were rumors, though, that in the bosom of his family, or when off at Frisco, New York, or Denver, he was resplendent in broadcloth and fine manners.

His family, by the way, was not large, but was remarkably good, what there was of it. He dwelt in a building which he had erected at large cost, and vast trouble, and which, in comparison with anything else to be found in the district, had almost a palatial look, though elsewhere it might have seemed a rather roughly built farm-house. At times his daughter was with him—Belle Malloy—the young lady after whom the mine was named.

When that occurred Belle was a very young lady, but since then she had had fine opportunity to grow. She was the living incarnation of the spirit of health and healthy beauty, and was full to the lips with rollicking Irish good-humor. Her eyes were a heavenly blue, her nose was Grecian, her cheeks had a delicate bloom which could defy sun and storm, and her lips at rest carried the double suggestion of a smile and a pout.

As to her figure, that was heavenly! On foot or on horseback, the fair Isabel was more than a picture to look at.

While attending school she had several times spent vacations at the mine, attended by a companion, and found the hours did not hang heavy on her hands. She had not yet reached that stage of age and experience when a matched companion of the other sex is absolutely necessary.

She was done with school, now, and had come out for a more extended stay than usual. John Malloy thought a great deal of his daughter, and did not care to let her out of his sight at present, yet was too busy to look after her elsewhere. In a few months

he hoped to have things in such shape they could go abroad. After that—well, he thought he might be able to make some arrangements which would put her in her proper sphere.

So far, the young lady had not found time or desire to complain. She had a big box of new books, a pile of music, a piano and violin, a couple of good saddle-horses, and young Mrs. Trego—a widow, by the way—to keep her company. In addition, Patrick Bandy, a lad of all work, was at her disposal, and followed in her rides with all the sedateness and discretion he would have exercised had she been taking her constitutionals in the Central Park, on the other side of the continent.

So, Miss Belle was not bored more than the average young lady out of employment, and generally came to her meals with a hearty appetite, and the consciousness that she had several secrets and aspirations which would make her father open his eyes if he knew of them!

Miss Belle sometimes managed to escape from the surveillance of Pat Bandy, and took her rides alone. On those occasions she had a sort of arrangement with herself that she was not to go far, especially if Mrs. Maud Trego was not with her.

She did not believe there was any especial danger, and did not know what fear meant, but had a wholesome regard for the feelings of her father on the subject.

It was the surprise of her life when, on that particular morning she caught a glimpse, in the distance, of half a dozen horsemen, who, half a mile below her, were aiming for the mountains.

Perhaps their appearance would not have attracted her attention had she not seen, or imagined, that they had a young lady with them, who was a prisoner.

Miss Belle had taken the early morning ride for the purpose of clearing her head, and having a chance to consider some weighty problems she had been in vain trying to satisfactorily arrange.

She had saddled her own horse, and come out without any special destination. For the sake of appearances she had brought along a revolver, with the use of which she was well acquainted. At sight of the cavalcade she was well satisfied that she had the weapon.

It was not easy to guess what could be the meaning of it, but she instantly made up her mind to learn more about it.

"Looks as though Captain Curse might be about. I'll wager Nellie has the heels of anything in the shape of horseflesh the outlaw has there, so I'll have a closer view if I have a race for it afterward. This way, Nellie, if you please!"

"Nellie" was stout yet supple, with velvety skin, intelligent eyes, and a mouth which was reasonably hard. She threw up her head as her mistress gave a soft dig at her neck, which was intended to be a pat, and then started off at an easy amble, in the way indicated by a light tug at the off rein. Nellie knew the road, and so did her mistress.

It was done on the impulse of the moment, though a little later Isabel was thinking it would have been better to ride back to the house at once, and give the alarm.

She would have done so had it not been for a lingering doubt whether the girl she saw in the distance was really a prisoner. She knew what it meant to come to close quarters with these brigands, and that it would be a weary old joke if she should bring out the force at the mine to rescue one who was part and parcel of the odorous combination.

"I'll have a trifle nearer view if I can head them off and take a peep from the Black Rock. I'll have it between them and me, and if I am seen there will be no trouble in making my retreat good."

So she thought to herself, and without

feeling a particle of alarm rode quietly but rapidly in the direction of the point in question.

Before long, Belle got to a part of the mountain she had never before visited alone. There had been an expedition to the Black Rock, as it was called, the previous summer, but her father and half a dozen more men were of the party. The thread of a trail she had been following became more indistinct, and for a moment Nellie herself hesitated to advance.

"I can't go far wrong," thought Belle to herself; "and Nellie will always bring me home, if I turn her head loose. I remember well enough the track they must be aiming for, and the top of the rock will command it. After I have made sure of what and who they are will be time enough to decide what to do next."

There is sometimes practically no limit to the courage of a girl, especially when there is no blood in sight.

The way to the Black Rock was somewhat rough, but presented no great obstacles, and it was not much over a mile from the point where she had been standing when the first glimpse of the party was obtained. Before very long she was fastening her horse a little distance from the foot of the rock. Then she gathered up her short riding-skirt and leisurely climbed over the boulders, and up the great face of the rock itself.

There, carefully keeping herself screened as much as possible, she gazed down into the gorge below.

As she had expected, the party was in sight; and it only took a glimpse to verify her late suspicions.

At the head rode a man in a mask, and from the descriptions heard of him she had not a doubt about its being Captain Curse.

Some of the other men were masked, and some had faces so covered with bushy whiskers their features were unrecognizable, anyway.

In the very middle of the procession rode the woman she had seen.

She seemed to be bound to the horse, with thongs also around her wrists, and a lead line from the bit of her mount to the horn of an outlaw's saddle. Evidently the men did not intend to allow her to give them any trouble. Even an attempt at escape had been carefully provided against.

"Good heavens! Who can she be?" was Belle's first thought.

"That girl never lives around here. She is a lady from the ground up. Where could the villains have captured her?"

Next came the question: what could be done? What could she herself do?

She did not doubt but that she knew the general direction in which the outlaws intended to travel, so the only thing was to get back to the house as quickly as possible, and arouse her father. In less than an hour a dozen or more men might be put on the trail.

Yet, she wished now she had been less cautious, or less curious in the outset. Had she given the alarm at once, it might have been possible to surprise these men before they reached their fastness.

Now, it might be they would stand a siege, with the advantages of position all on their side.

She gave a last look, noting well the face of the captive, who was now within a few hundred yards.

"Mother Mary, have mercy! It is Vera Vane!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands as she turned resolutely away.

Then, from the bottom of the rock, and between her and her steed, a man rose up, a rifle in his hand, exclaiming: "Han's up, leetle one! I reckon you're more o' our meat!"

CHAPTER VII.

A MILLIONAIRE FROM THE RANKS.

If it had not been for Diamond Dave, preparations for rescue would have gone slow. A way station on one of the trans-continental roads is a way station and nothing else, in most cases. Means of transportation in any other direction than along the line were at a discount.

So, naturally, on first inquiry, Kent Baker felt almost hopeless, but the Gilt-Edge Shooter knew a thing or two, and had got three hours' sleep. He was, therefore, as fresh as a daisy, and full of resources. By daybreak three mounted men had laid the trail, decided on its general direction, and were off at a gallop toward the Fair Isabel Mine, up on the mountain.

Rapidly as they rode, the morning was well under way by the time they reached John Malloy's.

The mine magnate himself was standing in the trail, some little distance from the house, and there was a troubled look on his face. He watched the men come tearing up as though their presence annoyed him, and his hands went toward his weapons. He could not guess what they wanted, but they came with an earnestness he did not like to see.

When they got nearer, he recognized Kent Baker, and was somewhat reassured. News of the strike had reached him, even up there, and it was possible the surveyor had been turned back on account of it.

His face cleared, and by the time the party drew up in front of him he was ready to give them a hearty welcome.

Baker had no time for that, and without waiting began with his story.

The track had been torn up by strikers, and then train robbers had made a raid on the sleepers, and carried off a young lady, whom they held for ransom. Twenty thousand dollars was the sum they had already demanded, and Mrs. Vane, the mother, was frantic. No such sum could she raise. The bandits had struck into the mountains in this direction, and the three had turned aside to ask for help. There were men working in the Fair Isabel, who could handle a Winchester, or a revolver, and no doubt knew the intricacies of the mountain path. The pursuers therefore hoped to get help; and for any time lost the men would be amply recompensed.

Malloy listened with a stolid face, that finally took on something of a frown.

"See here, me boys. It's a straight story you're givin me, Oi don't doubt, an' it's hilp you Oi will, but Oi'd rather do it in me own toime an' way."

John Malloy was on his own ground now, and a trifle excited. The brogue which he sometimes concealed, or forgot, showed itself to an elegant advantage. Diamond Dave was looking at him with eyes which seldom failed to read a man through and through, and he did not altogether like the expression of his face, but he waited for Kent Baker to answer.

"There's no time like the present time," responded Baker, warmly. "Just how you give us your hilp is no difference, so we get it, but I don't think any man should delay a minute to come to the rescue."

"Mebbe not, but Oi must think a little av mesilf, an' me own family. Captain Course is me neighbor, so to sp'ake, an' av Oi don't take him at the advantage he'll have plinty av toime to get aven, an' he's a b'ye that will doie thryin' to make his teeth mate. Lit me think a bit. Sure, an' Oi would sooner pay the twinty thousand mesilf than have him phor an enemy."

"Ransom means delay, and the breaking of her mother's heart. I couldn't stand the suspense myself," was the quick answer.

"It's generous of you to offer the amount the villains demand, and if the worst came to the worst, her mother would probably accept the accommodation, but it all sounds

infernally cold and calculating, and if I didn't know better I'd swear you never were an Irishman."

"Whist, me b'ye! Sure, an' Oi've bin nathuraloized. An' Oi'm a father, an' a moine-owner, an' must look afther me property. Not but what Oi would be glad to take Course in, but Oi must be sure av the ind foorst before Oi issue the dclaration av war. Twinty thousand wouldn't begin to cover the intrist av the damages he could do me; an' so far, the spalpeen has been sort av fri'ndly."

"You don't mean to say that you refuse to aid us?" hoily asked Kent, a flush of indignation on his face.

"Refuse, is it? What do yez take me for? But Oi am a mon with a daughter, an' the conthrol av a great property, an' av Oi wor to do anything rash it's both moight suffer for it. Captain Course is always as good as his word, the divil admoire him for it, an' she is safe as a church. Give him the toime an' we'll bargain the loife out av him."

"Time! Time!" exclaimed Kent, with an impatient gesture.

"I have lost too infernal much time already. Do you mean to say you would see a delicate woman left among those wretches for a moment, on the score of expediency? If you are afraid, Mr. Malloy, I shall say nothing further, but will do what I can with the assistance of men who are, at least, no cowards."

Diamond Dave had seen that his outfit was amply armed, but Baker never seemed to think of his tools, and flourished his arms after the fashion of a stump speaker who means to bring down the house. The sport watched him curiously, and wondered if he knew anything about the record of John Malloy. His own hands were in the side pockets of his coat by instinct, though he had not the remotest idea of using the deringers which rested there.

Malloy controlled himself by an effort, though his face flushed hotly.

"Ye can foll'y yer own way, an' Oi'll take moine. An' it's dollars to cints that it will be John Malloy who gets the young leddy out av the snarl. You're mad, now, an', av she's yer swateheart Oi don't blame ye; but Oi must look afther the interists all 'round."

"Do I understand that you refuse to allow me to recruit from the men at the mine?" asked Baker, paying no attention to what the mine-manager was saying.

"Av the men want to go, deuce a bit will Oi shtop thim; but you'll foind it's all a mishtake, an' be glad to have John Malloy to do the rale work. Oi doubt not Captain Course warned yez."

Kent Baker made no answer, but swung himself away by a twist of the rein, and the others followed him, though Diamond Dave lingered long enough to say a word or two in a low tone.

"He's hardly up to the ways of Captain Curse or he would take more kindly to advice. I'll set him straight when he gets a little cooler."

Malloy nodded, and Dave went on. He was a handsome, resolute-looking fellow on horseback, and the mine-manager followed him approvingly with his eyes.

"Looks loike a shport," he thought to himself; "but he carries the sinse av the outfit, an' mebbe he'll bring thim to rayson. Av he don't Oi'll b'ate ye he stays wid thim to the ind. He has it in his oye."

Then, he once more looked uneasily around, and his glance fell on Pat Bandy, who was coming along as fast as the legs of his pony could carry him.

"What's up now, ye little whilp? Where's Belle?"

"Sure, an' she's gone up the spout, an' Oi thought Oi'd be afther tillin' av yez."

"What do ye m'ane?"

John Malloy staggered back as though

struck hard, and glared at the freckled young face beaming down upon him with an expression that might easily have been taken for one of mischievous delight. If Diamond Dave had been watching just then he would have been apt to imagine the mine-manager already suspected what had happened.

"Av me eyes didn't decave me, sure an' she's been kerried off."

"Carried off, ye spalpeen? Who would have carried her off, and how could they do it?"

"Et's men wid masks, an' Oi think the fourst litter av the chafe's name wad be Captain Course."

Malloy was on foot, while the boy was on horseback, so, there was not much danger of anything like immediate punishment. Pat could afford to be a little impudent, and take his time to his revelations.

"An' what wor ye a-doin' at the toime? An' how did ye come to lit her run into the dangher? You're a shmall b'ye, but I thought ye wor to be trusted. What wor yer eyes for?"

"To see wid; an' be the same tokin it's not magic lanterns, nor yit photygrafts they be. An' av Miss Belle, rist her sowl av she's did, saddled her own horse, an' lit out whole Oi wor shlapin', it wor more be loock than be good jidgment Oi could folly her at all."

"But you did follow her?"

"Oi did; an' Oi caught a glimp' av her, 'way ahead, an' afther Oi got ez close ez Oi thought she wad want me to kim Oi toied him toight, an' cript up closter, an' saw the min' wid the masks, an' the chafe av thim wor tippin' his hat az foine a jontleman az iver drew brith. It's a heart-breaker he might be av he worn't a road-agent."

"Sthop yer infernal babber. Wor ye clost enough to hear phat he said?"

"I wor too clost to be azy in me moind, an' afore they moved off Oi listhened to the convorsation."

"'Good-mornin', Miss Malloy. Oi hope we see yez well; an' then to hissif, sort a loike: 'An' by the rowlin whales, it's a double cinch Oi have on yer father.'"

"The scoundrill!" exclaimed Malloy.

"Av she's not back here, safe and sound, be sundown, Oi'll break his oogly jaw. An', Patsey!"

"Yis, sor."

"Kape quiet for the prisint. It may be all a misthake."

"Yis, sor. An' manetoime Oi'll be afther sayin' av it's a mishtake did a pourpose or itherwise."

Patsey wheeled his pony before Malloy could stop him, and was off at a gallop. He had caught a glimpse of Diamond Dave, and wanted to whisper a word or two in his ear, before he was lost to him a together.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SPRINGING OF A TRAP.

"MISTHER DAVE!" exclaimed a youthful voice, that was as full of brogue as an egg is of meat.

The sport turned quickly at the sound. He had halted his companions, and was making some suggestions to Kent Baker, which were not being received after a very enthusiastic fashion.

Seeing Pat Bandy, he made a motion to tell his companions to remain where they were, and rode back a trifle to meet the boy.

"Speak low, Pat," was his salutation. "No use to post the world up. What is it?"

"Niver fear; it's a long head Oi have over me tongue. Sure an' all the worrld moight hear what Oi have to say. It's Miss Belle that wor a missin', an' Oim afther thinkin' she's gone off wid Capt'in Course. More be tokin she wint whither she wor willin' or not. It's druv the owld mon crazy, an' Oi wor wondherin' av it would knock you would."

"You sure of what you are saying?"

"Didn't Oi say it meself?"

"Steady, then! Be quiet for a moment and let me think it out."

He held up his hand in a continued token for silence, and sat gazing into vacancy which was over the boy's left shoulder, while his thoughts ran over the points suggested by the intelligence.

"There's more in it than I thought, and it may be all for the best. Looks as though the outlaw was a gentleman, and did not care to entertain his company alone. If any woman can take care of herself it is the wild little Irish girl; and I'm not sure but what she could take care of a friend or two besides. But where does John come in at? It struck me he was mighty lukewarm. Wonder how he takes it now?"

Dave's scattering reflections were interrupted by a call from Kent Baker, who was already growing impatient.

"All right, I'm with you!" was the answer.

"And there's a bit of intelligence that puts a new face on the matter. Patsey, here, tells me that the same gang have carried off Miss Malloy. If that is the case we will have John on the trail fast enough; and if he goes for one he'll save both."

"Serves him right!" answered Kent. "He will know how it feels himself. But he will hardly counsel delay now. Perhaps we had better find him again. What we wanted was his help, and it don't matter how we get it so he gives it."

"I think you are a little out," responded the young sport, reflectively. "John Malloy will not need our help to carry out things his way; and like as not he won't want to run them ours. I guess we had better go off into the woods all by ourselves alone, and get up a little game on private account. If we should happen to win—well, I won't say that it won't be feathers in our caps that I would like to put there. If Malloy fairly gets to going, like as not he will be too rash even for us. I think we can afford to drop him and his men out of sight altogether."

"Sure, an' av yez have room for a shmall b'ye, it's meself wa'd loike to go along wid ye. Oi know a thing or two that John Malloy wa'd shtare over, an' av yez wants to foind it all out Oi'll show yez the ropes."

"Come, then. If you can show us which way Captain Curse went I would sooner have you with us than John Malloy himself."

"Oi can do better, for I can show you where they got to," replied the boy; and without further effort to gain aid from the Fair Isabel the little party turned aside, and headed in the direction of the Black Rock.

Kent Baker, as he had been all along, was impatient over the pace, which he would have forced into a hard gallop had it not been for the cool-headed sport.

"Take it easy, Baker. Things have been coming our way a good deal better than we could have hoped for, and there's no hurry about it. We are more an army of observation than anything else, until we see how Malloy is going to stand up to his work. What do you think about it, Sandy?"

The silent man shrugged his shoulders, and delayed his answer for a moment while he looked around. Then, he sent a stream of yellow tobacco juice over his shoulder, and slowly answered:

"It looks queer, Dave; it looks queer. But I'm with yew."

At first, caution was not necessary, and they rode along at as fast a gait as they chose until the Black Rock was reached.

Here, Pat told what he had seen, and pointed out what had taken place. They noted where Miss Belle fastened her horse when she was preparing to climb the rock,

and Pat explained how she had been held up as she was descending, and how the man he fancied was Captain Curse himself came around the rock, and accepted her surrender.

Then, he piloted them around the rock and showed the route taken. He pointed out, too, another route, which he declared would bring them near to the eyrie of the bandits. He knew, because there were times when he had nothing particular to do during the absence of the young lady, and had made explorations which no one but a boy, and that a very reckless one, would have thought of undertaking.

The advantage of that was, it might be possible to flank the outlaws, and they could follow at a pace which would be dangerous so long as they did not know how soon they might stumble upon a sentry, or a rear guard.

All hands had breakfasted long ago, after a fashion—the boy having caught up a hasty morsel before striking out in search of his mistress—and under the excitement of the affair would not be apt to care to halt for rest or refreshment until they had run the outlaws to their lair. And they did not reflect that after that there might not be much time or opportunity for regular meals.

Patsey was a good guide. He pushed his sure-footed little pony along in front, and never once seemed to be at fault. Before very long even Kent Baker was satisfied with their rate of progress. They galloped on the very verge of a deep fissure, with a wall to the other side which every moment threatened to push them off into the abyss. They scrambled up what might have been the parapet of a fortification, and yet stumbled down a yet steeper declivity.

"Sure, an' we have thim now!" he exclaimed. "Here's wan av their own bridges, an' they niver thinkin' to guard it. Folly yer lader av yez wants ter be in at the dith."

And scarcely slackening his pace he plunged through the crevice of the wall of rock which had suddenly loomed up before them.

The footsteps of his pony sounded, for an instant, strangely dull and leaden, but a low, encouraging chuckle brought the men along in his wake. They could see nothing that was before them save their leader, and as long as he was going straight no one doubted to follow.

In fact, it might not have been altogether safe to pull in—certainly not for any one except Sandy, in the rear. A little blunder and a trifle of crowding, and a horse would go pitching off a hundred feet or more down into the barranca they were skirting.

Before he knew how he had done it, Kent Baker had passed safely over the danger, and was drawing a little to one side to be out of the way of those who were to follow, and Diamond Dave was holding the head of his skittish mustang very straight, while in a quiet way he gave warning:

"Down brakes if you can, Sandy, and hold your head level! If you crowd me—"

There was a dull creak below him, and a slight giving of the footing. If his gripe on the reins had not been like iron his mustang would have given a leap to one side, or tried to wheel at the very least.

Dave's heels sought the sides of his mount, and the animal had nothing to do but to go forward.

Fortunately he lost no time about it, for Sandy was coming, and he came with a rush. For an instant, at the crash, his mustang stood still, quivering all over, his head downward a trifle in spite of the hard hand which held it.

That instant gave Diamond Dave a chance to get out of the way, and the next, gathering himself together he gave a mighty spring—and landed with his forefeet on the brink of a side shoot to the barranca, over

which had spanned the rotten trunk of a huge tree, the upper side of which had long ago been blazed off to afford surer footing for man or beast.

As he landed the tree dropped away from under him, not to fall altogether, but to hang in a way horribly suggestive of danger!

Over his head pitched Sandy, the reins still in his grasp, to land on his feet, all crouched up.

The horse gave a struggle, and one hind foot was planted on the verge of the rock, by the side of the two front hoofs.

Sandy gave a tug, and the other followed. Before Diamond Dave had swung himself out of the saddle the horse was safely landed, and stood trembling a yard away from the abyss.

"Looks as though this young scallywag had brought us into a nice trap," said Dave, as he looked keenly around.

"We can't get back, that is pretty certain; and I'm not so sure we can go ahead, on foot, at least. The outlaws knew what they were about when they abandoned this trail."

"Git a move on yez!" exclaimed Patsey, unmoved by the late danger. "We can l'ave the horses here an' crape down the rocks. Av we're ahead av the spalpeens we can get the chance av the sayson to slaughter them to our heart's content."

"And if we don't get ahead of them?"

"Then," continued Patsey, speaking with a grin, "we'll have the chance to stay here an' stharve, or go out there an' be shot; an' wan av the two will be illegant sure to happen. Pears they be coming now."

CHAPTER IX.

THE PRISONERS OF CAPTAIN CURSE.

VERA VANE did not recover consciousness for some time after she had been stolen from the Pullman. The little cry she had succeeded in giving had caused her to receive an extra dose of chloroform.

Fortunately, she was young and healthy, and no evil results ensued. When she came to herself, she had a slight headache and felt a nervous trembling, which was not caused altogether by excitement and suspense.

She knew nothing of the capture of the man who had promptly followed on the trail of the bandits, nor of the note sent by him to her mother. A masterly silence was observed, and the men rode sullenly. The one who held her in his arms did indeed seem to try to touch her lightly, but she was too indignant just then to notice that symptom of respect. Everything was uncertain, and very terrible.

When they had got well away from the vicinity of the station there was a halt. Vera had come to her senses, and that fact had been observed.

"Can you ride a horse?" was the question asked her in a matter-of-fact way; which was followed by: "Do you want to, or would you sooner be held on?" when she had answered in the affirmative.

She decidedly preferred to ride by herself, though the chances of making her escape were not thereby increased. When they started again she was unable to slide from the back of the easy-going mount which had been given her, nor was she able to turn it aside and test the fleetness of its heels. There was nothing to do but to accept the situation and travel on in the way fate had marked out for her.

Toward morning, no symptoms of pursuit having been observed, there was a brief halt, when she obtained a little rest, a slight repast, and a drink from the spring where the party had drawn up.

Shortly after starting again they were seen by Belle Malloy, though, of that, of course, Vera was ignorant. She was taking but little note of things at a distance, and only knew they were drifting through an inclin-

ing pass which seemed to lead on into the heart of the mountains.

By this time she had found out which was the leader of the outfit, and noted that he was a young man, if his figure and bearing went for anything, though the mask over his face effectually hid his countenance. So far, he held his men well in hand, and had treated her with all the respect the situation admitted of.

After a time he made a motion of the hand, and said a few words to one of the men, who tossed his reins to a companion, threw himself from his horse, and glided off, making his way swiftly and silently.

What followed has already been explained. Belle Malloy was captured by the scout, and almost at the same time Captain Curse made his appearance, and Isabel saw the futility of resistance.

She did not evince any alarm, however. Her eyes searched through the eyelets of Captain Curse's mask until she caught his gaze, and then she spoke with a smile:

"There is no use of trying to make a mystery. I am the daughter of John Malloy, who can bring forty men on your trail in half an hour; and they will come without any nonsense when they once start. If you are wise you will treat me with respect. It may go easier with you when father begins the process of evening up."

"With the very greatest respect, my child," answered the outlaw, lifting his sombrero with a graceful flourish, and bowing with it in his hand until it nearly swept the ground.

"We could have spared ourselves this visit without a murmur, but since you are here your stay shall be made profitable as well as agreeable, if it be in our power. Your father will be under no apprehension on account of your absence, since we will take means to apprise him of your whereabouts, and I do not doubt but he will receive you safely back again in a short time, highly pleased with your tour of observation in the mountains."

"I suspect the pleasure will all be on the one side then," was the crisp answer. "If he is once forced to come out in search of me he will be in no good humor with the company he finds me in, and it will be well for you if you have a friend in court to plead your case. For the present I am in your hands; but I warn you to move with care."

"I shall; and see that you follow right behind me. No nonsense! I mean it."

Brusque and stern was the warning, and Belle followed him without further words. The scout who had captured her was in the rear, and though she might have shot the captain down she knew well enough that before she could do more the other outlaw would have disposed of her.

Besides that, since she had gone this far in the adventure, she was not altogether ready to drop it. If it was Vera Vane whom she had seen she intended to see her again.

In regard to that she was not long kept in suspense.

There was a tolerably practical path around the mass of heaped up bowlders, and before long she leaped lightly into the narrow track which served for a trail.

"And so, Vera, it is really you?" she said coolly, as she stepped to her side.

"I thought it was, but I wanted to be sure. What in the world are you doing here?"

Belle came like an apparition, and Vera could scarcely believe the evidence of her own senses.

She stared first at Miss Malloy, and then at the outlaws.

The latter seemed as much surprised as herself.

"Don't get excited, my dear!" continued Belle.

"These gentlemen of the road are just about as much my friends as they are yours."

I suspect they are after coin in both cases—and will be more apt to get hot lead. But, where in the world did you come from? and what do they mean, treating you like this?"

She had caught sight again of the various thongs which were acting as a restraining force, and her indignation rose once more.

Vera doubted no longer, and however much the cause of the meeting was to be regretted, she did not hesitate to express her delight at the unexpected appearance of a friend.

"My dear Belle! I am sure it is all a mystery; but if it was to bring us together it is a very charming one. If I could reach you I would kiss you on both cheeks. As I can't, consider it done. If an angel had dropped down from the clouds I would not have been half so much bewildered."

"Just save that bewilderment for a more convenient season. There is no great mystery about it, after all. I live over there, and started off for a morning ride. Then, I saw you in the distance, and turned aside to explore—to ascertain what it meant—and fell among thieves. The gentlemen will allow me to take off these ropes or I will know the reason why."

She turned angrily toward the captain, and actually was surprised at the low bow with which her veiled threat was received. Before Vera could fairly digest what was happening, she was unbound, and Belle was mounting her own horse, which had been discovered, and led forward.

By this Captain Curse was ready with a suggestion:

"Sorry, ladies, that at present we have not time to allow you the customary greetings, but we must move on. I am glad, however, to see you are old friends. Either of you would be a prize worth the holding, but together it will be hard indeed if our coffers are not twenty thousand richer through your visit. Of course, Miss Vane will consider herself under parole for the present. Be careful, both of you, for the route is none too easy. Forward all!"

Away went the gang, and this time they had two prisoners in their midst, though a casual spectator might not at once have guessed the fact.

The girls chattered together without a seeming shadow on their minds, and were full of questions and answers. They had gone to the same school but a few months ago, and yet, it seemed as though ages had intervened since their last meeting. There was much of interest to explain, and besides that, when they talked they kept up their courage. They had as much of that as the most, yet it was hardly to be expected a brace of girls would find themselves in such an unpleasant position, to say nothing of its positive dangers, without being troubled by certain fears, disguise them as they might.

It did not take long for Isabel to make her explanations; but Vera had a rather longer story to tell.

She had to explain the cause of her journey, and how she and her mother were on their way to attend a law-suit which bid fair to give them an interest in some property which had once belonged to her deceased father.

So far, almost, the journey had been made without incident; then came the attack of the train-robbers, which seemed to have been beaten off largely by one man, though a couple of friends had done what they could in their unarmed condition.

"And that one man?" asked Belle, breathlessly, a glint of suspicion in her eye.

"Did you hear his name?"

"Not in full, my dear, but they called him Diamond Dave, and for all the terrible reputation they gave him he seemed the mildest mannered, handsomest dear of a hero you could imagine."

"That is he!" exclaimed Belle. "I might have known it. He intended to try and get on that train, and what he intends he generally succeeds in doing. But, if you ever dare to more than look at him—why, Diamond Dave is my own particular hero! What do you suppose I am living out here in these wild woods for?"

"Don't be alarmed about your own peculiar property. Kent Baker was with him; and you remember who he was?"

"Oh, dear, what a beautiful complication! And after they whipped Mr. Curse?"

"Oh, then we crawled back to a switch, and they sent out a party to see if they could find out if the road was passable. And the outlaws came and stole me away while we all slept."

"Rest easy, then. If papa fails us, Dave will save us, and between us, I believe I would rather have it that last way!"

Then, with a little start, that was almost imperceptible, she added:

"Good heavens! I believe there he is now!"

CHAPTER X.

THE RECORD OF DIAMOND DAVE.

THE words were scarcely uttered before they were regretted, and so swiftly did she turn her gaze that Vera, who looked up almost instantly was thoroughly mystified. There was nothing in the direction Belle's glances seemed to indicate but a bare wall of rock.

"Not a word!" continued Belle, in a still lower tone. "I was mad to speak, but, wait a little and I will explain. I can only pray no one else saw what I observed."

Vera could be discernment itself. She had shown herself so far a girl of vast discretion and true courage, and she now acted the part of indifference to a charm. Without a sign of excitement or curiosity, she went back to the subject of their conversation.

"I can believe you, my dear, if I am not wrong in my guess. Mr. Dave is a hero, a demi-god, but—papa hardly sees him in that light."

And in spite of the position, she gave a mocking little laugh which had the ring of the real article. She was amused at the idea of Diamond Dave, with his deck and his shooters courting an alliance with the millionaire magnate's captivating and spirited daughter.

"Hush! I am very serious about it. He has been a wild boy, and I don't know that he is worth a cent, but I'm half in the mind to reform all that. My father's only daughter will have enough for both of us, and, oh, but he's a darling!"

The line of danger was passed, and in spite of her enthusiasm Belle gave a little sigh of relief. It had been the merest chance in the world, but, through a little rift, she had caught a fleeting glimpse of the face of her admirer, and knew that he was not far away.

How he was to make his presence known to the outlaws, or if he had a force with him, were questions she could not answer; but it was wisdom for her to allow him to remain undiscovered at least until she knew more.

Al, she knew was that the distance between them was not so great as to be impassable; and it was not likely he had any great force in attendance, she surmised; so all the more was "on the tip-toe of expectancy."

Both young ladies were skilled in the conversationalist art, and consequently had been able to carry on this rather lengthy conference without the outlaws being any the wiser. When they were side by side they could speak in a low tone, without being overheard. When they separated a trifle they were silent.

Yet, all the while, they managed to convey the impression that they were unaware of there being a bandit within a hundred

miles of them. Once together and their spirits and courage rose to the pitch of perfection.

There is no telling to what confidences they would have risen had they not discovered suddenly that they were come about to the present end of their journey. The leader of the cavalcade turned abruptly to one side, and piloted the way up a steep and narrow acclivity, and then entered through a frowning portal of overhanging rock. They had reached the headquarters of Captain Curse.

"Sorry, ladies, that our accommodations are not more in fitness with our distinguished guests, but these are our every-day quarters, and we had no time to order furniture from Paris. Such as they are, we welcome you to them, and hope you can make yourselves comfortable. I will have to leave you here for a time, to attend to our business interests, but in my absence Daddy Grimes will do everything to make your stay as agreeable as possible."

The captain made a low bow at the beginning of his speech, and another one at its close. He was politeness itself.

Isabel Malloy would have asked him some questions, and perhaps tried to give him some orders, for she was equal to almost any emergency, but the captain allowed her no chance. He turned away, and the man he had introduced as Daddy Grimes slipped in between him and the girls, as if to prevent the possibility of their following him.

"Ef yer please—jest don't. Ther Cap are too busy ter bother, an' ef yer knows what's good fur him an' you, better spend yer time a-prayin' fur him, 'stead ov to him. Ther's a heap sight 'pends on his gittin' back safe."

Daddy had a villainous looking face in spite of his gray hairs, and the idea of his suggesting such a thing as actual prayer was so ridiculous it was almost infernal. He was one of the few who did not think it necessary to wear a mask when he was out on a raid.

That might have been bravado, or, perhaps, he thought himself so well known it would be useless.

"Don't be excited, Father Grimes," purred Belle, with a courtesy. "We shall not attempt to interfere with your commander in the discharge of his duties. As I shall certainly one day have the pleasure of seeing you both hung, I would not be so selfish as to interfere with his occupations during the short time he has left to himself. You can show us to our rooms, and after that take yourselves off just as soon as possible, and see to getting our dinner ordered. My morning ride has given me the appetite of a wolf."

Daddy Grimes's grizzled mustache curled up over the sudden snarl her words evoked.

"Ef yer knowed what wor good fur ye you'd be tryin' ter make frien's 'stead ov enemies. This hyar job are one we kicked ag'in', an' I doubt ef it are goin' ter bring us good luck. We'd 'a' sooner went through the 'spress car an' stood our chances. We've figgered it up this hyar way. It ain't goin' ter bring us no luck, an' ther sooner we git outen it the better."

"Well, that is easily done. My friend and I ask for no escort of honor. Turn us loose and I will vouch for it that we can find our way to the Fair Isabel, and, as they say in the advertisements, no questions will be asked."

"S'kassly, me little lady; s'kassly. Ef thar is gold a goin' we may ez well git our sheer ov it; an' ther captain hez gone ter see about that. Ef he makes a failure we're goin' ter set up a 'public, an' try ther game over on our own account. We kin work ther trick, ef he can't. We ain't so infernal kid-gloved."

"You wouldn't dare to say that to his face," answered the girl in some indignation.

"If what I have heard of him be true Cap-

tain Curse does not consider his actions open to criticism. If I mistake not, he exterminated one gang for attempting something of the kind."

"So he did, an' tharfore we're a-watchin' ov him. An' ef it looks ez though he war able ter make ther riffle I ain't sure but what we hed better git rid ov him, aryhaw. He's kinder sot on hevin' ther lion's sheer, an' would make it mighty oncomfortable ef he didn't git it. Ther fack are, ye'r in a ugly sorter a perdicament, an' I wouldn't advize yer ter put on too much style till yer gits outen it."

Daddy tried to be impressive; but Isabel was a young lady it was hard to impress when she once set her head against it, and she looked at him as though she was grow-ing amused rather than indignant.

"Come, Daddy, we don't scare for a cent, and if you don't hop off lively and see about that dinner, we will smother you with that blanket, and lead this little insurrection ourselves, though, between us all, I would sooner trust Curse than you, any day. I don't think you can understand how ridiculously villainous you look."

The old man looked as though he would like to wring Belle's neck, but as the insurrection he had hinted at had not become an established fact, and he found she would not frighten, he moved off, muttering.

"And do you really think he is in earnest in what he says?" asked Vera, in some anxiety.

"He means it very much, the old villain, and if they actually start in on the lines he has laid out it will be awfully uncomfortable. But there is nothing like keeping your courage up; and that's the reason I am glad I am with you."

"But are you sure you really saw the gentleman we have been calling Diamond Dave, and what is his real name? It seems odd that I never heard it."

"Why neither have I!" exclaimed Belle, seemingly astonished at the thought.

"He is about, though; and that is enough to know for the present. He will turn up at the right time. He always does. Do you know, Vera, he has absolutely saved my life two or three times over, and the dear, modest creature wouldn't allow me to say a word of it to papa?"

"Are you in earnest, or is that only one of your delightful exaggerations?"

"Surely is it a fact. He saved me once from going under the wheels of the train. That was a year ago. When I tried to thank him he said if I didn't want my father to be taking all sorts of precautions I had better say nothing more about it, and coolly walked away."

"And never told his name, or—or—anything?"

"Never; but of course I inquired, and some one said it was Diamond Dave."

"And the next time?"

"That time he pulled me out of the water—and a lovely drip of it I was."

"And the next?"

"Oh, after that I got used to having him around, and didn't take much account of such little things. I ought to look it up in my diary, I suppose, but I really don't have time."

"Well, I won't trouble you to go over the record; but I only hope he will be able to repeat the operation, and include me in his saving—claws."

"Never fear. I caught a glimpse of him, and I haven't a doubt but what he will be competent for the occasion. It's not a very comfortable sort of a contract, either. I judge he was trying to head off these outlaws and got here a trifle too late. But it's just as well. With you and me in the thick of it it would never do to begin promiscuous shooting. He will have to try some other way."

They wondered for some time what that

way would be, and examined the quarters in which they found themselves installed with a great deal of curiosity.

The lamp by which they made their limited explorations showed them a small cell, from which there appeared to be but the one way of exit, and that leading to the larger room where the main force of the outlaws had their headquarters.

"It looks as though two or three of them could hold the path we came by against a hundred, but I'm not going to trouble myself about it—that's Master Dave's business. We can't get out so he must get in."

Then, Miss Belle pursed her lips up and threw herself down on the couch by the side of Vera, just as Daddy Grimes entered with the dinner.

CHAPTER XI.

A CHECK FOR THE RANSOM.

CAPTAIN CURSE went off to look after his affairs without any apparent misgivings, but his mind was not as much at ease as he would have it appear.

He knew the soldiers of fortune who were fighting under his orders, and he did not trust them further than his lead could reach them.

"The infernal wretches are just as apt to play me foul as if I was another man. Since Carter got taken in there's not a soul there who wouldn't sell me for a hundred dollars if he thought he could do it and save his own hide in the bargain. If Malloy knows what is good for him and his daughter he won't waste much time in coming to terms. If he don't turn up promptly I swear I won't answer for the consequences."

This was about the way the thoughts of Captain Curse were running as he made his way from the cave.

Had he known the danger which menaced him as he went down the trail he might have recognized that it was the very uncertainties he was considering which saved his life. Kent Baker had him lined, and it took some argument, and a good deal of firmness, on the part of Diamond Dave to induce him to let down the hammer without bursting a cartridge.

But Dave was not yet ready for an explosion, since he had discovered there was but one possible route toward the robbers, and that was commanded by a sentinel, who could hardly overlook them as they came.

Though they had a position almost as impregnable, it would be an awkward place to stand a siege; and were their presence once known there would be nothing to hinder the spiriting away of the young ladies while their attention was fully occupied protecting themselves.

So far, they had been hunting a Tartar; their ultimate success depended on not giving the Tartar any occasion for hunting them. Time enough for a desperate move when the outlaws were more off their guard. They had unfortunately come upon the scene a trifle too late, and could not now pick off their men in the narrow defile without any great danger to themselves or their prisoners.

So, Captain Curse went on his way unchallenged, leaving behind him the hidden four to discuss in a low tone the plans for the campaign.

First, the captain retraced his steps until he reached the spot where the party had been when Belle Malloy first caught sight of them.

He halted there, but did not have long to wait. One of his men came galloping up.

"The train are tied up thar, tight enough," was the intelligence he brought.

"It don't look ez though they war goin' ter move it fer quite a while. Track are tore up, an' no one ter fix it. No train comin' from ther other end ov ther road, either. Those fellers hev got in the'r work good."

"And the passengers? What are they doing?"

"Some ov 'em takin' it easy, an' swearin' they don't keere ez long ez ther grub don't run out. Ther company are bound ter keep 'em."

"Some ov 'em are tryin' ter get on ter Stan'back, but they ain't so clear how they're goin' ter do it, 'less they try it foot-back. An' one ov 'em hez stopped off fur good, I reckon. Some 'un come fur her, an' she's struck off in ther d'rection ov ther 'Belle.' Looked ez though it might be ther female ez lost her lamb. She war a-bleatin' at a great rate."

"Looks suspicious," thought Curse, as he put his hand under his mask to stroke his dark mustache.

"Is Jack going to play us foul, or is this part of the game he hasn't thought it worth while to let me into? I'll talk to him about it when I see him. By the time we get through I'll have him so deep in the mire he'll want a partner of just about my size to get him out."

He kept that portion of his thoughts to himself, however, and asked with some show of heat whether it would not have been possible to stop her long enough, at least, to find out what was her destination and why she went.

"Might 'a' did it boss, ef all us boys hed bin together; but thar would been heap better chance fur us to hev stopped lead than ter hev got a halt on her. Thar war a guard with her ez looked ez though they might be riddy fur fun, an' they lit out fur keeps. Reckon they be about ter ther house by this time."

"You did right to run no great risks without further orders. Let the spies keep to their work, and we will have a man here at sundown to hear the news."

The scout departed, and Captain Curse threw himself down carelessly, and rested his head on his hand. He was tired with the labors of the previous night, and this was as good a place to rest as any. It did not seem likely any great force had been sent out from the train, in search of the missing passenger; and if there had been he thought the trail had been too well blindfolded for it to reach him there.

"Malloy has had my note, and time enough, also, to cool off. As it is all pure business he ought to accept the situation; and he ought to know that he can only do harm by kicking over the traces. I think I can trust him."

The captain was a very good judge of human nature, so that he made no mistake in regard to John Malloy.

From the instant the latter had heard of the capture of his daughter he began expecting a communication and an appointment, and understood it would be useless to attempt anything against the man who made it.

"I am the restraining power," the latter wrote; "and if anything happened to me they would just elect a new captain, and go on with their business. And the new captain might not be as comfortable or as reliable to do business with."

"Ah, you have come at last!" Curse exclaimed as a footstep near at hand caused him to turn slightly and look over his shoulder.

"Yes, you infernal thraitor, Oi have come to see what it wor you wor plannin' now; an' av Oi don't shoot ye down afore Oi have done wid you it will be the wonder av the world."

"Yes, I see you have your hand in your pocket, all ready for me; but, I wouldn't if I were you. It would be a costly bit of satisfaction, which couldn't help you a particle, and wouldn't be such a bad thing for me. If I could have done it I would have resigned long ago, and that way would be as good a solution of the trouble as any. Under pres-

ent circumstances I am not sure life is at all worth living."

Malloy almost forgot his indignation. If this was the truth he had a hard deal to make. The captain never made a movement toward the weapons in his belt, and smiled as though the prospect of death was something delightful.

"Av ye had treated me white, John Malloy would have kipt his conthrack to the last pinny, and thried to do ye good, besides. What have ye done wid me daughter?"

"Easy, John. I see you are still somewhat excited. I am keeping my share of the contract as well as I know how. The young lady is at present under my protection, and as long as I can take care of myself I will see that she comes to no harm. Your daughter is only an incidental figure in the game."

"But what business had she cuttin' any figure at all, at all?"

"In the first place, I don't know that we could have kept her out. She caught sight of the outfit at a distance, and joined it of her own accord. It seems she and the young lady are old schoolmates, and they were so happy at meeting they did not take much note of surroundings. I left them as happy in each other's company as clams at low water."

John Malloy gave a low whistle of surprise.

"Of course, we didn't object to the addition. It made it that much the more certain that John Malloy would not forget his contract."

"Niver f'are for that. An' av Oi had known it Oi moight have saved me tin thousand. The thrane won't move for a wake, an' that wor all the toime Oi wanted. An' the madam is up at me house now. But you've earned the money, an' whin ye bring the young leddies back, safe an' sound, it's riddy an' waitin' for yez Oi'll be."

"I'm afraid that scheme will hardly wash. In our business we are forced to call for cash in advance. Life is very uncertain, and our standing in a law court, were we to try to have a contract enforced, would be precarious."

Malloy glared at the cool speaker as though he would like to rend him. His pistols were at his hand and he could shoot the outlaw down—wherein would be the profit?

"Just so, John. If I were removed I would not answer for the safety of the prisoners. In case you came out in force to take them, the first move of Daddy Grimes would be to cut their throats and throw them over the rocks. Then, he and the rest of them would fight as men fight who know their necks are in a noose. If I was there myself I could hardly prevent it without shooting down three or four of the worst. But, of course, I would arrange it that way; and the tigers know it, so they only snarl behind my back, or show their teeth when they think I am not looking."

"An' av Oi pay yez fourst where is my saycurry?"

"I'm not sure I can give you any. The word of Captain Curse has so far been considered a good deal better than his bond. As long as I am bound in honor I never fail my friends."

"Av Oi worsure av yer b'yes Oi wouldn't fear. But wid the morey wanst in their fists—"

"Give me your check, John, and swear it will be paid fair and honest, and I'll get the ladies back safe inside of twenty-four hours."

"An' av Oi don't?"

"I know that when you once set that head of yours man nor angel can turn it. Try that game and I'll just do this. I'll blow up the pass so you can't follow, and skip through the mountain. I never saw a man I would sooner have for a father-in-law, and the next time you see your only darling she will be the wife of Captain Curse, and

you will be handing over the coin to take us abroad."

"You divil! I bel'ave ye wa'd troy it on. Here's your check, an' Oi'll keep me min away av Oi can, but Oi won't answer for thim av yez wait too long. Av they foind out the truth they'll folly ye to the death."

Malloy had evidently been prepared for this result to the interview, and took out a check which had already been filled up.

The bandit had brought John Malloy to his terms, so there was no need to waste more time, or run further risks of being seen. With a few parting cautions he withdrew, and as he went he thought:

"The Irishman is no fool, anyway; and yet, if he knew what a bold, big bluff I was making he might have hesitated over signing that check."

CHAPTER XII.

DADDY GRIMES GOES INTO BUSINESS.

BELLE MALLOY knew that joking with Daddy Grimes was very much like plugging a tiger when the tiger is loose. At the same time, she had been rather an imperious bit of mischief all her life, and hardly knew what fear meant. Daddy did not have a very comfortable time while waiting on the ladies.

He took it all without more than an occasional snarl, and finally left them once more to their own resources, having fed them well, and defeated their efforts to gain any information which might show how the land lay. The future remained as uncertain as ever.

Had they been able to follow Daddy Grimes, and could they have heard his remarks made to his companions shortly after leaving them, they might not have settled down to the business of waiting with quite so good a grace.

Time wore on, however, and at last the guard outside halted the returning Captain Curse long enough to make sure of his identity—and to put those inside on their guard. It was intended the gang should carry on business on military lines, but when the captain was away discipline frequently relaxed. If Curse could have dropped down upon his men unheralded there would, perhaps, have been something darker than a frown under his mask.

Daddy Grimes came forward to meet him, and gave the customary military salute with all his usual exactness.

"All right here, eh, Daddy?" was the careless question of the captain, as he halted in front of his lieutenant.

"Right ez usu'l. They don't 'pear ter be no ways 'larmed, so fur. They stuffed themselves jest too full, an' if they stayed hyar much longer, thar would be a famine in ther land."

"Glad to hear it. Didn't want to break their nerves up, or scare them a bit more than was necessary. Such valuable goods ought to be delivered in good order if we want to make money in a trade."

"Val'lyble they orter be, fur they treat a man ez though he warn't good enough ter wipe the'r old shoes on. Ef I war axed my way I'd say they oughter be brungdown a bit."

"It's the old man who wants to be brought down; and he is going to come down, too, with a vengeance. I've seen him, and the deal has been made. All that is necessary to do now is to deliver the goods."

"Good, hard cash are ther way we wants him ter come, an' ef he throws that out to a big figger ther boys will swear by him. We bin lettin' him slip erlong ez though we didn't know he war a big, fat angel, an' I war 'feared he war goin' ter slip through, alltergether. Et's bin kinder workin' us up."

"Which all came from wanting to meddle with matters that didn't concern you. I have been running the intellectual part of this circus, and so far I don't think you have

anything to complain of. You have to have gloves on when you undertake to handle John Malloy, and if luck had not been in our favor I would not have cared to undertake it even then. I'll be all-fired glad when we get safely out of the mix with our little ten thousand ahead."

"Ten thousand ain't much fur a man like him. We ain't gen'rally makin' a strike ov less than twice that, an' ther boys—well, mebbe they won't kick, but they'll do a heap ov thinkin' ef it ain't up to ther av'rige."

"Let them think, Daddy; but beware how you talk. It might lead some of them into trouble. I'm running this outfit, and I know just about what ought to be the limit of the game. And I know that when you wolves once begin to growl it's not long before you follow it up with a bite."

"Better not ter make 'em growl, then, Cap. Ef you'd jest run 'em a leetle keerful like, thar would be neither growlin' ner bitin'."

There was a shade of slinking insolence in the words, and the manner in which they were spoken; but the captain seemed not to notice it as he answered:

"An angel from heaven couldn't run such a gang to suit all parties concerned, and I'd hardly be likely to try it. Right between the bark and the bite I prefer to shoot. Take care, old man, that I don't have to begin with you."

He turned away toward the inner room, and Daddy followed, looking up from under his grizzly eyebrows with a steady stare. He knew, or thought he knew, that his life was hanging in the balance, yet he never flinched or gave token that he was suspected.

"What's ther next move on ther program?" he asked.

"Orders are orders, an' when I git 'em I foller 'em, but ef I don't git 'em how kin I?"

"Lay low and keep your eyes open—all. There is only one danger—that some blundering fools may track us over from the railroad, and try to drive us out of here before we are ready to go. If they wait till I get back it won't make so much difference. It is about time to skip this ranch anyhow."

"An' ther gals—what's ter be did with them?"

"Don't worry about them. I can run the rest of the affair, and I'm taking them along with me. Don't make me tell it over again."

The captain spoke irritably, yet without any actual anger; and before Daddy Grimes could answer he had passed into the presence of the young ladies.

"I hope I come as a messenger of good tidings," was his salutation, given with a low bow.

"In the line of business we have put you to some unavoidable inconvenience, but I hope you will consider it in the light of an adventure; and be none the worse for it. All the arrangements have been satisfactorily made, and I have come to escort you to what you will probably consider a place of safety."

Vera gave a little cry of delight, and clasped her hands. Belle Malloy drew herself up into as stately a position as she knew how to assume, and stood waiting to hear more.

"Your mother, Miss Vane, has been taken to the residence of Mr. Malloy, with whom I have concluded negotiations; and in the course of a couple hours you will doubtless be in her arms. You are not required to thank me, though I flatter myself I have looked after your welfare as well as you could have done it yourself."

His tone was bantering, yet it was not likely the young ladies would take offense. Just at that moment they actually began to

think he was much more of a gentleman than they had thought a train robber and an outlaw could be.

Vera looked straight into his eyes, which met her gaze without ever flinching. This was all business, and as such was something the captain tried not to be ashamed of.

"And mother—does she know?" gasped the young lady.

"Probably she does by this time. Malloy knows he can trust me, just as I have trusted him, and doubtless has informed her, since he would be sure he would be raising no false hopes. I know the meeting will be an affecting one, and I am only too sorry that I will not be able to witness it; but John would hardly care to bring her to the trysting-place. If you are ready we may as well set out."

"We have been ready all the time," quavered Vera, more and more overcome with delight; but Belle Malloy was watching Daddy Grimes, and she suddenly threw her hand to her bosom, as she did so exclaiming:

"Look out!"

Strange as it might seem, the caution was intended for Captain Curse.

It came too late. There was the sharp report of a pistol, and the captain fell, drilled through and through, while Daddy Grimes, leaping forward, stood over his body with a smoking revolver in his hand.

The shot acted like a signal.

Half a dozen of the masked marauders rushed into the room, flourishing weapons, but stopped near the threshold when they saw what had been the meaning of the report.

"All over an' done fur," said Grimes, composedly. "Only took narve an' good shootin'. He ain't more ner ary other man ef yer hits him whar he lives. He'll never slaughter any more ov the boys; an' I reckon we're jest ther half ov ten thousand in, an' ef ye'r game ter try ther racket, thar ain't no reason why John Malloy shouldn't bleed ten thousand more."

"We're game ter try it ef yer thinks it'll work," said one of the men, though he turned his eyes away from the still quivering heap on the floor.

"In course it'll work. It's got ter work. Thar's ther capital fur our business, an' ez long ez we hold on ter it we kin git ary percentage we ax," and he pointed at the shivering girls.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TEST OF THE TORTURE.

JOHN MALLOY kept his own counsel, and amused Mrs. Vane with a fairy story which fitted the case as well as he knew how to make it.

She was half dead with fear and anxiety and he could have been pardoned for trying any scheme to allay her nervous dread. He really stretched the truth less than he knew when he told her that a band of resolute men were on the trail, and that they would follow the outlaws, on whose trail they had thrown themselves, and make a rescue if it was within the bounds of possibility.

If they failed there was still every reason to hope, as he had taken means to open communication from another side, and stood ready to pay the ransom to the last cent, if it should be needful.

At the same time, he told nothing of his own bereavement, and concealed the loss of his only child with a Spartan firmness.

As the day waned away he went off to again meet the outlaw chief, full of the hope that his daughter would soon be in his arms.

He reached the spot where the meeting was to take place, and found no one there. When he had grown impatient, and nervous, and was altogether off his guard,—swish! A rope came hurtling through the air, and before he could realize how it was done he found himself a prisoner.

"Stiddy be jerks, John Malloy!" said a wicked voice, as a man crept forward; and then Daddy Grimes was leering down at him with a vicious grin on his battered features.

At first the mine magnate was too badly choked to speak. He only glared up at the lowering faces which gathered near.

By the time his throat had straightened itself, and his breath should have come regularly, he was about choked with wrath.

He made more than one effort before he spluttered out:

"This is the way ye kape faith, is it? Sure, an' Oi'll have yez driv off the face av the earth, av it costs a million. It's the wrong man ye chose for a foight whin ye wint for me. Ye are just cowardly, tricherous thaves, an' Oi'll say yez all hung av Oi have to howld the rope mesilf."

"Go slow, Malloy. It's coin we want, an' it's coin we'll hev. When you get ter rantin' 'round that way ye'r' only makin' things harder fur yourself an' ther young ladies. You an' ther captain war settin' up a half-price game that wouldn't work on us, nohow. Come to Limerick an' we'll treat you white."

"Lightnin' blast yez, Oi came there wanst, an' this wor the way ye kipt faith. Do yez think Oi'm all fool, to trust yez ag'in?"

"Thar's not goin' ter be much trustin' a-goin' from this time on. It's got ter be all solid cash, and we'll hold on ter all we hev till we git it. Roust yerself up an' come along. This hyar deal can't jest be finished up in a twinklin'."

"Take me to your captain, ye hounds! Oi want to till him what Oi think av him. Oi put mesilf in his hands, an' he's played me dhirt."

"Don't guess yer ez anxious ter see him ez yer lets on; an' it'd be a dog-goned sight longer journey than you keer 'bout takin' without a change ov linen. Captain Curse are dead, an' it war I thot shot him. Git a russel on er we'll put it on fur ye."

Malloy did not doubt the intelligence, and it came back to him with a shock. He knew, or had known, Curse as a man of his word, whether he had any other good qualities or not. But of these men there was not one he could trust. And as for his daughter—he dared not think of her.

He said not another word, and only made one vain effort to break the cords which Daddy Grimes had deftly knotted around his wrists.

Then he arose to his feet, and nodded to let them know he was ready. He fancied that if he was moved from this spot he would be taken to his daughter. After that, he would speak, or act, as the case might be.

Though Malloy did not know the exact spot where the den of the outlaws was located, he was pretty sure it was not at any great distance, and still maintaining his silence, he suffered himself to be taken away.

Inwardly, he was none the less anxious; and the way seemed interminable, though in reality it did not take long to reach the eyrie in the mountain.

"Will yer have it out now, er will yer wait till mornin'?" questioned Daddy Grimes when they had reached the end of the journey, and, save those who were out on picket duty, or acting as sentinels, all the outlaws had been gathered around him.

"Now!" he said firmly, but looking around in search of a missing face.

"John Malloy is not the mon to put off the bad hour av it must come. But Oi must say Belle foorst. Ontil Oi do, divil a word will Oi spake av yez troy me from now till doomsday."

The suspicion darted into his mind that perhaps this gang was working a game of their own, and that Captain Curse was really in the possession of the prisoners, and per-

haps even now was taking them to a place of safety.

"Oh, we'll trot her out, fast enough, if that is what you want. But I reckon you and she would be a heap sight happier if we'd fix up our leetle 'rangement 'thout bringin' ther women in. It won't make 'em feel good when they see yer drawed up to ther rack, an' ther fodder mighty dry."

Daddy waved his hand, however, and one of the men left the circle, returning in a moment, bringing with him the two girls.

Belle was there, and looking none the worse for her visit, but her companion could scarcely say as much.

Vera looked very pale and very weak. There were blood-splotches on her dress, and a bandage around her arm. She clung to Isabel, who, in turn, supported her with one arm around her waist.

"Is that the way yez kape faith wid me?" asked Malloy, sternly, pointing at the drooping girl.

"Do yez think Oi'd dale wid scoundrils ez wad harrum a girl?"

"Accidents will happen, an' it war her fault. When I sent Curse over ther range she put herself in line. Ther ball went through an' through him an' lodged in her arm. She's a little staggered with ther shock, but it's more skeer than hurt, an' she'll be all right by mornin'—specially if she gits away frum hyar."

"What do yez pripose?" asked Malloy, looking at his daughter, who had thoroughly contained herself even at the sight of her father.

"You tried to make a deal with Captain Curse that war, and he sold us out, but he couldn't d'liver ther goods. We ain't none ov yer two-cent gangs. Sence we took to ther road there ain't no record ov a haul less ner twenty thousand dollars, an' that's our limit on ther lower end."

"Av yez don't sthick to yer bargains ye'll foind no wan'll do business with yez. A mon may as will be did an' done wid it. Av ye raises proice wanst what's to hindher raisin' av it again? Tin thousand have Oi paid, an' tin thousand will it stay."

"An' that's another thing. Checks don't go with us. Curse could handle such things, but he's skipped for the summer land. It's got ter be hard, cold cash or a hard, cold corpse. Two or three ov 'em mebbe. You write a letter to your friends and tell 'em to git it ready—twenty thousand, mind you—an' we'll let 'em know where to send it to. It'll take a week ef yer gets a move on, an' ef ye don't we'll be chargin' interest."

"Divil a cint more will yez get. Ye have me check for tin thousand, an' av that won't do, chrack yer whip!"

The mine-magnate had made up his mind, and taken his stand. If anything could be told from his tone he meant every word he was saying. Daddy gave a cruel laugh.

"Ye'r' most too fresh ter skin, eh? Mebbe that scheme will work, an' mebbe it won't. Ef we begins ter crack that whip we'll keep it up till somethin' breaks. An' ef ye don't give in I'll bet high yer execky ter won't be so hard-hearted. How kin ye? It'll be ther gal's money, an' bet yer sweet life she'll be glad ernuff ter buy herself outen ther hobble."

Malloy grew a trifle redder in the face, and bit his lips, but remained silent. He had made up his mind, and kept his gaze away from the two girls. He was more afraid of being moved by their entreaties than by anything the outlaws could do or say. He was glad they had kept silent.

Daddy Grimes grew impressive.

"You ain't a fool, John Malloy, an' yer orter know when ye'r' beat. We want that letter, an' we want it now. We're goin' ter blow up ther path hyar, an' skip fur other quarters. Afore we go we want ter send

word to yer frien's. Last time of askin'. Are ye goin' ter come down?"

"Last time av answerin', no!"

"Then, by the living blazes, we'll begin cracking that same whip. Get the fire ready, boys; and a couple of you see the gals don't chip. When it gets too funny they may want a hand in."

Malloy's hands were already bound, and to knot a rope around his ankles was but the work of a moment. While two of the men held their Winchesters horizontally across their breasts, barring the way for Belle Malloy and her friend, others brought forward the fagots, and laid up the torture pile.

"Et looks like rushin' matters, but I've told yer why we're doin' it. Will yer give in now, er wait ten minnits longer, till yer' all one blister? I know what I'm talkin' of. I've tried it more ner once, an' she never fails."

He waited a moment for an answer, but none came, and Malloy set his square jaws still more firmly.

"Then strike ther match! We'll hev a leetle, twenty-thousand dollar blaze."

The match was struck, and soon the fire began to crackle merrily.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALIVE FOR VENGEANCE.

If the genteel bandit who answered to the name of Captain Curse was not dead there was small blame to be attached to Daddy Grimes, who had shot to kill, and with nine men out of ten his work would have been finished a second after he had pulled the trigger.

Fortunately for him, if not for the world at large, Captain Curse was a tenth man, and terribly hard to kill. If there is such a thing as a charmed life he seemed to have it.

The bullet pierced him through and through, and he fell to its stroke; but he was not by any means dead.

For a little he was senseless, and that fact served him well. Daddy Grimes bent over him, marked the dreadful nature of his wound, thought he saw his expiring quiver, and felt no further fear of the future. Coolly he rifled the pockets of the late commander, saw to a surety that he had the check which had been received from the manager of the Fair Isabel, and then turned the body over to a couple of the subordinate outlaws.

"Drag him off an' pitch him out ov sight somewhar, over ther rocks. Out ov sight out ov mind, an' we don't want ter leave him lyin' 'round hyar."

Curse seemed to be dead; and if he was not, the treatment received certainly should have been enough to insure that end.

The two men who had the body in charge carried it on along the cave-like ledge, and finally dumped it over where they thought it would take a clear fall of some fifty feet, and be forever out of sight, or danger of resurrection.

When the object left their hands the darkness of the gulch swallowed it up, and the rocks hid it. They turned and went back to their brothers in crime.

Daddy Grimes saw them return, and understood from a satisfied nod given by the leader that his commands had been obeyed. That was sufficient.

He asked no questions. There might be some there who would not care to hear the particulars in a matter of which they had not altogether approved. Besides, there were other things more important. The trapping of John Malloy was next in order, and was the chief thing to be discussed. Daddy had played his cards so well that every man understood it meant ten thousand dollars for the gang; and it was that belief which cost Captain Curse his chieftainship.

How well their plans for the mine-magnate's capture succeeded the reader has

already seen; and it is now in order to follow the fortunes of the deposed captain. Dead or alive his influence was still to be felt.

When the two recreants had cast him from the ledge he was still insensible, and he dropped with no more sense of motion than a log.

It was fortunate for him that it was so. Fate took his case in its own hands, and managed things a great deal better without his assistance than it could have done with it.

He was bruised a little, wounded a trifle more, but went sliding down where a living man would have fallen, and his descent was checked instead of broken.

Though their forms were invisible from above, yet there were tenants to the gorge, and one of them, gazing upward in a vain effort to solve the question of what caused the noise he had heard above him, received Captain Curse in his arms.

This skulker who so fortunately was there answered to the name of Sandy, and he was the individual who had been helping Kent Baker to locate a line for the proposed track from the Fair Isabel.

His hand swung around to the back of the outlaw, and there fell upon a spot where it was wet and warm.

Sandy had been staggered by the shock, but his wits were all about him, and he gave a low whistle.

The call was immediately answered by another from a point not far distant, and then, several figures, thoroughly indistinct in the darkness, crept toward him.

The noise had not been made without risk, but Sandy knew something had happened which might be of more service than hours of blind exploration. They were trying to flank the position of the bandits, but so far had failed to discover the route which Pat Bandy was certain existed, and which they had tried to trace out from a distance while the daylight was with them.

This man whom he held in his arms had been wounded and cast out for dead, but already there were certain tremors through his body which told that life was not extinct, and if he could be revived he might speak.

Hastily he explained to Diamond Dave, who had heard something of what had occurred, and guessed the rest when he knew that Sandy himself was uninjured.

"Ett's a case tew investigate," the latter whispered.

"Ett's some pore cuss ez they jist shot an' throwed overboard. I know ett's one ov the gang, 'cause why, I kin feel his mask. He ain't dead yit, an' ef we kin bring him tew life fur enough he'll be gittin' even the best way he knows heow. Give mea light an' a leetle rum an' I kin plaster him up long enough tew talk."

"Good enough, if that is the way it is going to go. We'll have both in a minute, but if he can stand the carrying, better take him along to the hole in the rocks we were aiming for. If it is the spot we hoped it was we won't need him. If it's not, we'll have a show to ask him the catechism without any danger of outsiders wringing into the class.

There was an opening in the side of the canyon which the watchers had marked, and which they had decided to attempt to reach after the fallen. It might be but a simple niche, or it might be the portal to a cavern; but whichever it was it would screen them from observation, and thitherward the outlaw was carried.

Then, Diamond lit the little lantern which he had not until now dared to use, and he and Sandy examined the body.

Life had begun to return. There was a sob and a gasp. The throat received the few drops of liquor poured into it without a spasm, and while Sandy was plugging the

wound with skillful fingers consciousness asserted itself. By the time the amateur surgeon was through with his limited appliances Captain Curse was looking at him with eyes that were dull indeed, but not without their fair share of light and reason.

The mask had been torn from the face of the outlaw, but so far the features revealed had not been read for the purpose of recognition. Now, Sandy gave something of a start.

"Jewhilikins, Bill! Kin it be yew?"

The exclamation left his lips before he had time to think, or he might have kept the fact of his recognition to himself.

Yet that exclamation appeared to have been for the best.

At the sound the bandit captain seemed to pull himself together, and the dull stare changed into a keen, searching look, while the pale lips moved faintly, though the sound they uttered was inaudible.

"Dyin'? Not a but ov it!" said Sandy, cheerfully, interpreting the whisper by the movement of the lips.

"You have caught it hot, but it might be wu'ss. With a few more drops ov Jamaicky yew kin read yewr title clear to a consid' rable smart lease ov life. Sorry tew see yew have been in sich 'tarnal bad company, an' if yew would like to git even now's yewr chaine. My friends, hyer, would just admire tew glory in the dewin' ov it."

With Sandy everything was rum which was entitled to the name of spirits, and he moistened the lips of the wounded man with a few drops more from the flask of whisky which Diamond Dave had supplied.

Captain Curse gathered strength; and even had the courage to smile.

"I remember you," he whispered. "I can't call you pard now, but I used to in the old days when John Malloy and I were friends. The villain held straight enough, but I believe myself I'm not going to die. And if I don't!"

There was no trouble in understanding what he meant by that exclamation. The captain had occasion for adding up many such scores in his past life, and so far as he knew had left not one of them unsettled.

"Glad tew hear yew, but I'm afeared we can't wait. Yew may hev guessed ett that we hev business up there, an' it's ez good, mebbe, that yew ain't thar. I'll give yew my word, which aire good fur all it's wu'th, that we'll help yew out ov the hopple, but yew must help us back ag'in. We'll leave yew hyer fur a leetle, but I'll be back ag'in. Now, how'll we git at 'em?"

A cunning sort of a look came into the eyes of the apparently half-dying man.

"I can trust you, Sandy, but no man can speak for his friends. Have them swear."

"See here, old man," said the sport coming forward again.

"I'm not a rat-catcher, nor am I exactly an angel myself, though I profess to be square as a die. If you have ever heard of Diamond Dave, you know his word is as good as several oaths and a heap-sight of affidavits. Help us to get those two young ladies out of the den up there, and when they are safely turned over to their parents or guardians, I'll do my level best to plaster you up and turn you loose for a new deal. It's a mighty big bargain; but it's for a mighty big case."

The eyes of the captain roved toward Kent Baker. He was the really dangerous factor in the game for life or death which he had to play.

"What are you all waiting for?" exclaimed the young surveyor.

"If you hadn't clapped the breaks on with a hard hand, I would have been there hours ago, and shot or been shot. You are eating my heart out with your delay. I'll swear to anything so we can go ahead. If we can release the young ladies, what do I care for a train-robber more or less? Take him and be

happy. But you want to move soon or I'll go myself. I'll fool time no longer."

"Easy, Baker! Easy, good lord!" drawled Dave, the Gilt-Edge Shooter, not a particle moved by the outbreak.

"I can shoot a little bit myself, but these men are all past masters with the pistol. They are just as desperate as we are, just as sure shots, and it may be they can pull trigger a trifle faster. It may be I have as much at stake as you, and that is the reason I want to go slow and sure. But, if we can't take them at a disadvantage, if there's only a bit of a show for success I'll engage to be just as desperate as yourself. Now, Sandy, make your bargain."

Captain Curse had retained a hold on Diamond Dave's flask, and had gathered strength as its contents decreased. There was a flush on his face now, and a fierce fire in his eyes.

"Bargain, is it? Do you think Captain Curse would sell out the men with whom he took the oath? Never. Like you, Diamond Dave, my word is good for all it was given for!"

An angry exclamation arose to the lips of Kent Baker, and as the wounded man declared his name the fingers of the young man twitched as though they were already on the trigger. If he could have had his own way he would have shot the outlaw, and gone on.

Dave made a warning gesture. He knew that it might be hours before, unaided, they could find a way to go, and he felt there was more to come.

"But I'll let you see how Captain Curse maintains discipline, or works revenge. Give me a few seconds more to be myself again in, and then—the way will be open behind me, and you can follow."

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE LAST MOMENT.

THE bandit had solved the riddle after his own way, though not altogether to the satisfaction of Kent Baker, who muttered:

"And if you dare attempt treachery to us I'll know better where to aim. You'll never walk further with a bullet in the base of your brain."

Diamond Dave understood better, and answered heartily:

"Good enough, old man. And if you think it worth while you can swear me in as a special, for this night only—though, I confess, as yet, I am not as bloodthirsty as I might be. Don't you doubt it that we'll be close behind you, though we'll let you have the first shot."

All this had taken time, and Curse was not even yet ready to move, though he had gained strength in what was certainly a marvelous manner. When, at last, he did rise up it was with a spasm of pain on his features.

He mastered that, however, and slowly, for a time supported by Sandy, began picking his way along the base of the canyon wall. The little alcove had nothing to do with the path to the cave above.

It seemed to be a blind trail which he followed, but it was one which he knew well.

There was a way of reaching the headquarters of the gang, and slowly, but with unflinching nerve, he won his way upward—always in the advance.

He might have been outstripped had it not been for the revolver he carried in his hand, and his oft-repeated caution that there was plenty of time. There was nothing like a threat in the words, but even impatient Kent Baker knew that if he wanted to lead he must first pass over a dead body; and he was also horribly aware that in a game of snap shooting the chances were in favor of the outlaw.

When, however, they were gathered on a ledge which was really the rear corridor,

leading to the hold of the bandits, he was compelled to admit that without the skillful guidance of the man whom he looked upon as half dead, they could never have reached that post of advantage in the darkness; nor, having reached it, would they have known which way to turn.

Captain Curse crept away without a word, while they followed closely and in silence.

Overhead and to one side was the bare rock, and on the other side the open canyon. They were hidden in shadows, yet they could catch faintly the outlines of their leader, and they moved as he moved, while his halt was the signal for them to stand still.

Suddenly, he crouched, and then rose up as he leaped forward.

There was the low, crouching sound, as of a heavy blow, and a sentinel, whose eyes unfortunately for him had been peering in the wrong direction, fell with a low moan.

And then, in the hidden recesses beyond, there pealed out the report of a pistol, and the long drawn, shrill shriek of a woman.

Daddy Grimes when he set out to torture the mine-magnate into coming to his terms had no intention of carrying the work to a fatal termination.

He had counted a good deal on certain twinges of pain which without doubt would have to be inflicted; but much more on the moral effect of the presence of his daughter.

Belle had shut her lips firmly when she was brought forward, and though her one arm was around the waist of her companion it was to encourage Vera rather than because she needed anything to cling to herself.

Just how far this thing was to go on, or what she could or would do to bring it to an end was more than she had as yet decided. For the present, she could only watch and wait. This was her father's business, and with that she had seldom interfered.

It was more than likely she looked upon the preparations as a gigantic bit of bluff, and she even felt a curiosity to know which was going to win, Daddy Grimes or her father.

Her mind was still open for cool reflection, and a very little of it showed her this torture which was about to begin would be the real thing. There was no danger of immediate death, but everything was arranged to produce intense agony. In spite of herself she shivered, and grew cold.

When the match was applied the crisis seemed reached; and yet she waited. Until now she could not see distinctly her father's features. She studied them, and as yet saw nothing but resistance there. It was too soon yet to speak. Once the flood-gate of words opened and there would be a breakdown somewhere.

But as the fire crept toward her father's bared feet she could endure it no longer, and gave a bound which carried her toward him.

"Hold!" she cried. "This must stop!"

Her thought was to scatter the fire, and deal with these fiends at any price. The man with the Winchester barred her way.

"Git back, lady bird. This thing hez gone too fur not to go fuder. Ef we stoped now you'd think we war on y foolin'. He's got ter squirm a leetle."

He thrust her back with his crossed gun, and she staggered from the shock, which maddened more than it hurt. Single-handed she could not hope to even effect a diversion, but she thought no longer of that.

The weapon which so far she had kept concealed was handy to her grasp and its presence unsuspected. She came again, and this time was silent.

As the outlaw again barred her way with his rifle her hand flew up and she fired full in his face, while Vera, tottering and weak from her wound, gave the cry which had reached the ears without.

The movement was so sudden that it had a certain success. The man threw up his hands and toppled over; but as he fell there came, without orders and without delay, a rush, in the midst of which Belle found herself a plaything, and her weapon a toy.

The pistol was torn from her grasp, and several hands fell roughly on her shoulders, with a gripe which hurt.

"Stiddy, boys!" rung out the voice of Daddy Grimes.

"Tie ther wild-cat, an' fetch her for' rads. We'll give her a dose ov ther same kind, an' see which'll squeal fu'st. When ther one yells ther other'll give in."

A roar of brutal voices chorused their assent, and forward the panting girl was drawn.

Then—

"Attention!"

The harsh order fell on their ears like a thunder-clap, and too much surprised to raise a weapon, the men wheeled toward the voice.

Captain Curse stood there, erect, and with revolver leveled, not a sign of wound or weakness to be seen.

Rapid though his motions were it felt an age as the muzzle of the deposed captain's revolver turned toward Daddy Grimes. It seemed as though he was giving them all a chance to defend themselves.

Had it not been for the thought there must be something supernatural about the appearance, there might have been an effort to take advantage of it, but that fear paralyzed them, and with a cold sneer on his lips Curse quietly pulled trigger.

Then, as if by instinct, and with the speed of thought, he singled out the two men who had flung him over the rocks.

The three, almost as one man, fell in a heap, while from behind Captain Curse four armed intruders sprung into view.

"Away with you!" shouted Curse. "Linger a moment and I open my guns on you. There's a force behind me you can't resist. Among you I'm done for, but I've had my revenge!"

As he spoke he toppled over, his fictitious strength utterly exhausted, while the outlaws, in a panic which there was no combating, had rushed headlong through the other entrance, in the very wildest of routs.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PAYMENT OF THE RANSOM.

THOUGH the outlaws were in full retreat there was no certainty the panic would last, and Sandy was wise enough to keep them going.

These men actually feared Captain Curse as though he was Satan himself, and perhaps a little worse, because there may be some chance to bargain with the arch-fiend, but after such a trick as they had played their captain there could be none at all. They had not seen his fall; his words had meant nothing, and they imagined they were his shots which came hurtling after them as they plunged down the narrow passage leading to the trail.

Master Pat was better engaged. As the outlaws disappeared Diamond Dave sprung to the side of Isabel.

When the hands had dropped away from her, upon the appearance of the captain, she had reeled toward her father, and then measured her length on the floor. At the turn of the tide her strength had forsaken her; and on her brow there was a slight cut from which the oozing blood had given to her white face a ghastly stain.

Kent Baker had eyes only for Vera. It did not matter to him that once upon a time there had been certain misunderstandings which had wrenched him and this girl apart. Just now he saw nothing else, and was by her side in a minute, though with his weap-

oned hand he was pointing toward the spot where the train robbers had disappeared.

Had it not been for Patsey the mine magnate might have had a roasting time of it in the next few minutes. There would, perhaps, have been little danger of his life, but in another sixty seconds it would have been doubtful if he could have walked for a month. The boy scattered the brands, cut the bands, and pulled John Malloy to one side. Then, the man of several millions was raised to his feet; and, as Patsey pushed the fagots together, and nursed them into a cheerful blaze, the magnate stared around him.

Miss Vera was not badly hurt, and she and Kent Baker were already nearly through with a brief but thoroughly satisfactory explanation. Captain Curse, having exhausted himself in that last fierce struggle for vengeance, lay dead where he fell; while, by the flaming light of the now roaring fire, Malloy saw his own daughter, none the worse for her late experiences, actually kissing Diamond Dave!

For a moment his feelings were too deep for utterance, and in that moment Belle had come to his side and was laughing over him a little, and crying a good deal.

He was a man of hard, practical sense, and knew that this could not be the first time they had met, and that it was not a good opportunity to make the observations which naturally rose to his lips.

"There! There! That's enough of this nonsense. Give me a pistol, some wan. Those divils are not dead yet, and they may be back."

"Let them come," said Diamond Dave, once more his cool, insouciant self. "We're between them and the young ladies now, and nothing could please me better than a meeting."

"And if my eyes went for anything, you're between the young ladies and me," grumbled Malloy, holding out his arms toward his daughter.

At the same time Sandy came in, chuckling softly, his almost empty revolver in his hand.

The mine magnate caught a glimpse of him, and saw the face as he had not seen it when the three men rode up to urge him to aid them, and this time he recognized.

"Howly Moses!" he exclaimed; "It's Sandy Martin himself!"

Sandy Martin was the brother of Mrs. Vane, and the one-time pard of John Malloy in the mine which was now known as the Fair Isabel.

He had wandered away when the fortunes of the find had seemed at a low ebb, and had been having a rather disastrous time down in old Mexico. He had lately returned from the regions beyond Chihuahua, poor in pocket and health, and was scouting around to take stock in the property in which he suspected he had more than a little interest.

As for the lawsuit which his sister had instituted, he knew nothing at all about it, or that there was a chance that before the end of this very week he would be legally declared dead and buried, and his effects open for administration.

Nor did he know that while his sister was lingering here, held alike by the great railroad strike, and by the heart-breaking abduction of her daughter, the wheels of justice were rolling on in the way that the interests of John Malloy would most have them roll.

Had he known he might have suspected, perhaps, for the dead captain had some years before been known to both him and Malloy; and they had befriended him in such a way at that time that they ought to have been able to command his best services now. If he suspected afterward he asked no ques-

tions, for John Malloy could be a square pard, however tricky he might prove as a legal adversary; and the affairs of the Fair Isabel went on from that date in a manner that was eminently satisfactory to Sandy Vane and his sister.

As to the meeting which took place, a few hours after things had quieted down, at the cave of the outlaws, it is hardly the correct thing to describe it. Mother and daughter were too happy to make much wail; and as the eyes of the rest were on them they kissed, and were happy.

Shortly afterward Kent Baker received a tacit assurance that he was considered quite one of the family; Diamond Dave was overwhelmed with an enthusiasm of thanks; and even Patsey would have had a similar avalanche to endure had he not been away with a lot of men from the mine, burying the dead, and getting the horses out of the scrape into which he, with the best of intentions, had led them.

Poor brutes! They had had a bad time of it, but they came out none the worse, and went back to their owner, the following day, along with a little bundle of notes which was fully worth their value.

Diamond Dave, having once come fairly face to face with the father of Belle Malloy, was forever after done with stolen interviews, and stealthy maneuvers. There were worse fellows in the world than the Gilt-Edge Shooter, and at an important crisis in the lives of them all he had posed as the man for the occasion. He came and went after his and Belle's own free wills, and it is now an open secret that when the mine-owner and his daughter go abroad, he will go with them as one of the family.

The band of Captain Curse operated in that section no more, and the supposition is that it scattered its remnants over half a dozen States and Territories to evade the righteous vengeance of John Malloy, who had openly sworn, on the very first discovery of their trail to hunt them to its other end and hang them all without judge or jury. As he had the wealth and nerve to carry out what he meant, the threat was more effectual than dozens of deputy marshals, backed by all the terrors of the law—which were not, in fact, terrors at all for such hardened men.

During the excitement of the strike Mike McKane had a limb broken, and received other damages which unfitted him for active life, while his men scattered out, and handled picks and shovels on other sections where their record was unknown. They had done their share in the great strike, and their work had proved a failure.

THE END.

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